

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you recognise; you know the drill by now

Feedback: Of course

AN: This story was inspired, in part, by MaxFic's excellent story 'Harry Potter and the Time Mage'; I can recommend you read it. I'm thinking that this will eventually turn into a series, featuring a rewrite of the books, but focusing mainly on the different areas rather than the identical ones.

AN 2: If the beating scene seems a bit weak, I apologise; I'm not very good at this kind of scene, but it has to be written for the story to work

Harry Potter/Granger and the Philosopher's Stone

Chapter 1 - Change

It was half past six in the morning.

After being six years old for just over six hours, Harry Potter was already constantly afraid of the possibility of death in a way that no child his age should be.

It wasn't simply the fact that his parents had died when he was around one; if it had merely been that, he could have shrugged it off easily enough. After all, the odds of him ever being in a similar situation were pretty slim...

No, the problem was his guardians, the Dursleys. As if it wasn't bad enough that they constantly referred to him as a freak, and probably wouldn't even have kept him in the first place if they didn't need someone to do various tasks around the house, his Uncle Vernon was currently going through a phase where his favourite activity seemed to be beating Harry half to death.

It had at first been merely a regular thing on his birthday- not an eagerly-anticipated 'present'- but in recent times the beatings seemed

to have become an almost daily thing, and always for things that couldn't have been his fault in the first place.

After all, he couldn't even *reach* the top of the table without standing on a chair; how could he have moved that pot of boiling water where Aunt Petunia would put her hand without anyone noticing? And as for accusing him for stealing a bar of chocolate and hiding it in his cupboard... all right, the chocolate didn't get there *itself*, but since the bars were kept in the uppermost part of the cupboard, how could he have taken one? They never left him alone *anywhere* long enough to get a chair into a position where he could stand on it and grab the chocolate...

Harry couldn't even *begin* to imagine what would happen to him today. Would Vernon just beat him and leave it at that, or would he make today a 'special' beating, since it was his birthday?

Couldn't they just accept that he couldn't be responsible and treat him as a *person*? Or at least explain *why* they called him a 'freak'...?

And then Harry's resolve snapped.

He'd had enough.

He couldn't take this any more. He knew that what he was about to try would only make things worse for himself if he was discovered, and it might not make a difference anyway, but at least he would be doing something to *try* and stop the beatings, even if it achieved nothing.

Besides, what else could the Dursleys do to him? Kill him? At least then he'd be away from them...

He opened his cupboard (They never locked it on the nights before his birthdays; he thought this might be because they wanted to tempt him into doing something wrong), crept over to the phone in the hall, picked up the receiver, and dialled 999 as quietly as he could.

"Emergency services," a voice said on the other end of the line. "What service do you require?"

“Police,” Harry whispered into the speaker, trying to keep quiet. He wasn’t sure if the police were the right people to call, but he couldn’t think of anyone else to call, and they should be able to do *something*, right?

“Yes?” a voice said on the other end of the line. “This is the police; what seems to be the nature of the trouble?”

“Please, you have to help me...” Harry whispered, looking around nervously, afraid that Uncle Vernon may come down any minute. “It’s my uncle; he keeps beating me and he won’t stop... I think he’ll make it worse today as it’s my birthday... I live at Number Four Privet Drive in Little Whinging...”

“Please...” he said, feeling tears starting to trickle down his cheeks, but not caring any more, “please help me... I’m six... I don’t want to die...”

“All right, son,” the voice on the other end of the line said, with a tone of voice that Harry assumed was concern; he’d never heard that kind of tone used when someone was talking about *him*. “We’re on our way.”

“Thank you...” Harry whispered, as he put the phone down on its hook and began to sneak back towards his cupboard...

“BOY!” a voice called out from above.

Harry’s eyes widened in fear.

No... he thought to himself. Please... no... not now... not when I’m so close...

Desperately, he ran towards his cupboard and dived in, shutting the door behind him even as he heard a large someone begin to walk down the stairs.

Vaguely, Harry was reminded of a Japanese monster movie he’d once seen mentioned in a magazine- *Godzilla*, he thought the move have been called- but shook it off. The monster in the movie had seemed terrifying, of course, but at least it was only in the *movie*.

Uncle Vernon, on the other hand, was very much real.

The footsteps stopped outside his cupboard, and Harry swallowed nervously as he glanced at his watch. Uncle Vernon must have only recently woken up; it had taken him nearly five minutes to get down the stairs after he'd called out his typical name for Harry, although that could have just been because he knew that the 'anticipation' was far worse than the actual beating, as far as Harry was concerned. Harry wasn't sure how far away the police station was, but Little Whinging was hardly a large town, and with traffic as quiet as it normally was this early in the morning, it couldn't take them that long to get here, could it...?

Harry hoped not, anyway; he wasn't sure how long he could keep away from Uncle Vernon.

"Open up, boy!" Vernon's voice roared from the other side of the door.

"NO!" Harry called back, trying to cower away in the corner of the cupboard as best he could. He may have been only six, and always rather small and skinny for his age, but there were still only so many places where he could hide in 'comfort'.

"You'd better do as you're told, freak!" Vernon yelled back; either Aunt Petunia and Dudley were deep sleepers, or they knew what was going on and were gleefully listening to it. "You're only making it worse!"

If Harry hadn't been so terrified, he would have laughed.

Worse? How could it *be* worse? If he was hit any harder, he'd probably lose the ability to *walk*, and even Vernon would never go *that* far; who'd do the work around here with Harry gone?

After a moment's silence, Vernon seemed to lose it. He yanked open the door, grabbed Harry by the collar of his pyjama top, dragged him out of the cupboard, and then held the small boy up to his eye level.

"THOUGHT YOU COULD ESCAPE ME, BOY!" he yelled at his young nephew, who could only look back at him in terror. "THOUGHT YOU

COULD ESCAPE THE ONLY BIRTHDAY PRESENT YOU'LL EVER *DESERVE!* FAT CHANCE!"

As he lashed out with the other hand, Harry only briefly had time to see the baseball bat in Uncle Vernon's hand before it collided with his left arm and a loud cracking sound was heard.

"NO!" Harry yelled in pain as Uncle Vernon dropped him to the floor and lashed out with a powerful kick. "Stop... please..."

"QUIT COMPLAINING!" Vernon yelled at him as he lashed out once more. "YOU KNOW YOU DESERVE THIS, FREAK!"

"Help..." Harry whispered, as he felt something hit him in one leg...

Then everything went black, Harry pleading that he would wake up and this would all be over...

When Harry next opened his eyes, he found himself lying in a hospital bed, plaster casts around his arms and legs, an I.V. tube in one arm, and a policeman sitting beside his bed.

"Ugh..." Harry muttered to himself as he blinked his eyes open, briefly relieved to find that he still had his glasses; he'd hate to have to try and find new ones.

"Harry?" the policeman said, leaning forward to look at him.

Now that Harry heard his voice, he found it easy to recognise; after all, as far his memory was concerned, he'd only spoken to this man a few minutes ago.

"You... you were on the other end, weren't you?" he said, looking at the man as he dazedly blinked his eyes open. "You heard my phone-call..."

"Yes, I did," the man said, nodding as he looked at Harry. "A colleague and I got there as soon we could; we were concerned at first that your uncle had finished you already, but we saw you breathing after he had been subdued."

Noting Harry's suddenly apprehensive expression, the man smiled. "Don't worry, Harry; everything's been taken care of. With our eyewitness testimony, coupled with your injuries, we managed to get your uncle and aunt sent to prison for child abuse. Your cousin's gone to live with his Aunt Marge, but she didn't seem interested in taking care of you as well."

Harry smiled in relief.

"It's fine with me; I didn't like her anyway," he assured the man. "Besides, she's no real relation of mine; she's just my uncle's sister. So... what happens to me now?"

"Well, the court transferred you to an orphanage in London," the policeman explained, looking slightly sadly at Harry as he spoke. "You'll miss your first week or so of school, I'm afraid- you were unconscious for a couple of weeks, and your injuries still aren't fully healed- but you're recovering at a rapid rate, so you should be back on your feet soon."

He stood up and smiled down at Harry apologetically. "Well, I've got to go; I only came here because I wanted to see how you were on my way to work. I'll have a nurse come in to take a look at you, OK?"

Harry nodded. "OK," he said. "And... sir?" he said, just before the policeman could turn away. "Thank you for helping me."

The man smiled slightly at Harry. "That's my job, Harry," he said dismissively. "I'm just glad you're safe."

Then he turned around and walked out of the door, and out of Harry's life.

A couple of weeks later, Harry was walking into his new classroom. As the policeman had told him, he'd recovered from his injuries around two weeks after he'd regained consciousness, and been transferred to the orphanage shortly afterwards. He'd spent the first few days getting used to his new surroundings (He was grateful he'd gone there on a Friday; it meant that he had the whole weekend to make himself at home), but now it was time for school, and, on some

level, he was looking forward to it. True, the Dursleys had (Albeit reluctantly) sent him to school last year, but this was different.

If nothing else, at least here he might be able to make some friends. He'd already made a few acquaintances at the orphanage, true, but this was a public school that was located near to the orphanage, so there'd be more children here.

And, as he looked around the room for somewhere to sit, his eyes fell on a small girl, maybe only a few months older than him, sitting off on a table in the corner by herself.

Instantly, Harry decided he would get to know her. After all, he'd spent the first few years of his life (Baring the year or so he'd lived with his parents before the car crash) being ignored, and he knew what it felt like. Nobody should have to go through that without at least being given a *chance*...

Walking over to the table, he sat down beside the little girl and smiled slightly at her as she turned to look at him in astonishment.

"Hi," Harry said, holding out a hand to her like he'd seen on TV. "I'm Harry; is it OK if I sit here?"

Smiling shyly back at him, the girl took his hand and shook it.

"It's fine," she said to him. "I'm Hermione; it's very nice to meet you, Harry."

Chapter 2 – Making Friends

“So, what are your mummy and daddy like?” Hermione asked Harry later as the two of them sat outside at break time eating their snacks. The lessons had been a little difficult for Harry at first, but Hermione had quickly helped him understand some of the questions; she had remarkably detailed notes on her past lessons.

Harry sighed sadly as he looked over at Hermione, putting aside his cheese sandwich as he turned to talk to his new friend. “I... I don’t really know, Hermione,” he said, averting his gaze to his feet as he spoke. “They... both died in a car crash when I was one; I don’t even remember them.”

“What?” Hermione said, looking at Harry in horror. “You mean you can’t even remember your mummy and daddy?”

“No,” Harry replied, shaking his head. “I don’t even know much about them; I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle after they died, and they...”

He sighed sadly and looked over at Hermione. “They never really cared about me, to be honest; my uncle always called me a freak and treated me like a slave. He... he beat me a lot, as well; that’s actually why I was moved to a nearby orphanage.”

Hermione just stared at him, tears gleaming in her eyes.

“Your... your uncle hit you?” she asked, staring at Harry in horror. “But... but...”

And suddenly she grabbed Harry in her arms and began to cry into his shoulder. Not sure what else to do, Harry just put his arms around her and held her steady, suddenly grateful that they’d chosen a more secluded corner of the playground to eat in; at least here there was less chance of a teacher coming over to find out what was wrong.

“Hey...” he said, patting her on the back reassuringly and hoping he was doing it right; he didn’t really have much experience with physical

comfort. "It's all right, Hermione; I don't have to put up with him any more, right?"

"I-I know..." Hermione mumbled, as she pulled away, still sniffing as she looked at Harry. "But... but I can't believe your uncle would do that to you... You seem so *nice*..."

Harry smiled at her. "Thanks," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "But, hey; I've got you as a friend now, right? The way I see it, life hasn't given me *that* bad a time."

Hermione smiled back at him gratefully, sniffing once or twice more to clear her nose. "Th-thanks, Harry," she said, smiling back at him.

"You're welcome," Harry replied. "So, what do your parents do?"

"Oh, my mummy and daddy are dentists," said Hermione, smiling to show him a missing tooth in her mouth.

"Really?" Harry asked, looking at her inquiringly. "So... you never get to have chocolate then?"

"No, I get to have chocolate now and again; just not that often," Hermione replied, shrugging dismissively. "It doesn't bother me; chocolate's nice, but I prefer fruit."

Harry smiled back at her. "Yeah, I enjoy apples, but I've always *loved* chocolate," he said to her, grinning as the conversation turned to inane details about food, all thoughts of the Dursleys forgotten.

Over the next week or so, Harry and Hermione spent most of their free time together, Hermione helping Harry out in his classes until he'd caught up with the week or so he'd missed at the beginning of the term during their lessons, and the two of them just generally relaxing and enjoying themselves during break time.

Harry had never had the chance to just be a child before- the Dursleys had generally prevented him from doing anything or going anywhere that he might actually like- and Hermione had always just stayed in the classroom during break and read a new book that she'd

found lying around. Now that the two of them had someone to actually play *with*, they were having the time of their lives. The time went by so rapidly that, almost before they knew it, it was Friday, with only a couple of periods more before the end of the day, and they were sitting out in the playground on the upper level of the climbing frame, discussing their plans for the weekend.

"I'll probably just try and get through that maths homework we were given," Harry said, swinging his legs slightly as he looked over at Hermione. "I wouldn't mind going out, but the orphanage has this annoying rule about keeping the younger children in unless they're in groups with an adult."

"I'm really not sure what mummy and daddy have arranged," Hermione said, staring up at the sky as she spoke. "It's a busy weekend for them, from what I've heard; I think they're planning on renting a film for us to watch tomorrow night."

Harry smiled over at her. "Enjoy it," he said, reaching over and squeezing her hand slightly. "You really are lucky, you know, 'Mione."

Hermione shook her head as she looked back at Harry, a faint tear in the corner of her left eye.

"No, Harry," she said, looking at her new friend sadly. "I'm *not* lucky; you were just terribly, *terribly unlucky*... And *you* need to remember that!"

Harry swallowed slightly at her words.

"Yeah, maybe..." he said, turning away to look at some of the other children.

"*Harry*," Hermione said forcefully, making the young boy turn back to look at her. "I don't know what happened to make your uncle hate you so much, but you *weren't* to blame for it. You are the best friend I have *ever* had, and if anyone hated you, it was only because they were too stupid to understand what a nice person you are. Do you understand me?"

Harry could only nod, impressed slightly by Hermione's statement; evidently those books she read were a good influence on her.

"Thanks," he said, after a moment's pause to think about what she'd told him. He was about to say something else, but then the bell rang for classes to start again. The two of them jumped down from the climbing frame and ran back towards their classroom, the desire to avoid getting into trouble driving what Harry had been about to say next out of his mind.

The next morning, staring out of his window in his room at the orphanage, Harry sighed in boredom as he flicked through his maths book. He knew his homework was important, and he genuinely *wanted* to do well, but he just felt so alone at the orphanage now. He'd always managed to get along with the other children, but he knew that he would never fit in; they all constantly hoped that they would be adopted, but Harry was content to remain where he was.

If nothing else, at least here he could be sure he wouldn't end up with *another* abusive foster parent...

"Harry?" a very familiar voice said from his door.

"What... Hermione?" Harry said in surprise, putting his maths book to one side and looking in the direction of the voice. As he'd thought, it was Hermione standing in the door, her hand being held by a tall brown-haired woman who could only be Hermione's mother. "What are you doing here?"

"Mummy had the day off, so I convinced her to take me down to see if you could come over and play," Hermione explained, smiling brightly over at her friend.

"Really?" Harry said, jumping off the bed and smiling up at Mrs Granger. "What Mr McNish say?" He was already fairly certain as to what the answer would be, of course; Mr McNish, the owner of the orphanage, may be over-obsessive about rules at times, but he was always willing to keep the children happy.

“He said that, so long as I sign you out, it’s fine,” Mrs Granger replied, smiling down at the young boy her daughter had been unable to stop talking about for the past week. “Shall we go?”

“Yes please,” Harry said, taking her offered hand as the three of them began to walk towards the orphanage entrance.

Outside the orphanage, concealed by a remarkably elaborate spell, a tall, elderly man with a long white beard, dressed in a long purple robe, stood outside the orphanage, and watched as Harry and Hermione walked out of the door ahead of Mrs Granger, talking nineteen to the dozen and grinning like they’d just heard the best joke in the world.

Watching the small boy as he talked to his friend, with no sign of the trauma he must have endured prior to his near-death experience on his sixth birthday, Albus Dumbledore sighed.

“He’s happy...” he said thoughtfully to himself, as Mrs Granger walked out of the door after signing Harry out and began to walk down towards her car. He knew himself that he had not moved Harry to the Dursleys with the idea that they would be good foster parents- Lily had told him enough about her sister to gather that much- but he had hoped that they would at least treat Harry well. After all, he was barely even a year old, and had done nothing to them; why should they not care for him? He had not taken their sheer vindictiveness into account, and because of that, Harry had nearly died.

There and then, Dumbledore made his mind up.

No action would be taken regarding Harry Potter’s living accommodations at present. He would see about setting up alternate wards around the orphanage for the moment- at least enough to ensure that he was alerted to anyone trying to capture Harry- and, if anything should change in the future, he would take the necessary steps.

But right now, all Dumbledore wanted was to ensure that the Boy Who Lived enjoyed a peaceful, happy life, ignorant of his fame until

he was emotionally capable of accepting his identity without it going to his head.

He merely hoped that Harry was adopted by a caring couple soon enough; wards were tricky things to erect over public residences...

Chapter 3 – Adoption

The next few weeks of school followed the same pattern as the first one. During the school days, Harry and Hermione spent most of their time together, playing together at break-times and helping each other out during lessons. At first the help was a very one-sided affair- Hermione helping Harry catch up with something that had been covered in the week or so he'd missed while in hospital- but, over time, the help became more equally divided, each one working on a certain problem or question that gave the other trouble.

Harry was actually rather surprised that he caught on to some details better than Hermione, but a part of him felt that it made sense. In the past, Harry had never really been driven to excel at his studies, since the Dursleys had often beaten him if he'd ever scored better than Dudley at some test or another, but now that he didn't have their abuse to worry about, he was truly starting to apply himself to his studies, and was proving to be very capable at the job.

True, he wasn't quite as good as Hermione in the theory in some cases- he forgot a few of the minor details when the time came- but he was getting there...

Every weekend, regardless of what else came up, Hermione always managed to convince her parents to let her spend time with Harry. Even if neither of them were available to keep an eye on the two children for the whole day, one of them simply took around half an hour or so off to drive Hermione to the orphanage, and then they left her there for the day to play with her friend.

However, Harry wasn't the only one who was changed by having Hermione as a friend. His school grades picked up a significant amount with her help, true, but Hermione was also affected by her new friend, although only her parents really noticed it.

As Alan and Jane Granger watched their daughter spend increasing more time with her new friend, they couldn't help but notice the change that occurred to her personality.

They had always encouraged their daughter's schoolwork, but had often felt that she should have a bit more fun and spend time with friends. Despite their best efforts, her dedication to her studies, coupled with her fondness for reading, had made it difficult for Hermione to get along well with the other students in her first year at school, but when Harry had started talking to her, she had begun to come out of her shell.

She not only found someone who had been deprived of company almost as much as she had (Albeit for different reasons), but had also found someone who was willing to listen to her talk about the things she had read in her books. Having been deprived of fiction for most of his early years, Harry was always ready to listen when Hermione started talking about one of the books she had read, a fact that played no small part in helping to boost her self-esteem. With Harry's help, she finally learned to relax and just find time to be a little girl on some occasions, as was evidenced by the sheer amount of time she spent playing with Harry these days.

All in all, the only thing about their friendship that Harry and Hermione regretted was that it had to be cut short for a time when the first major holiday came. Hermione and her parents were going up to Glasgow to spend Christmas with her cousins, so Harry and her wouldn't be able to see each other over the holiday like they'd hoped. Hermione had tried to ask her parents if they could take Harry up with them, but the orphanage couldn't let a child leave for that long, so Harry had resigned himself to staying where he was while his friend.

The day the school closed for the Christmas holidays, Jane wasn't surprised to see her daughter giving Harry a tight hug at the bus stop that he always waited at, before joining her in the car to go home. If there was anything Jane was grateful to Harry for, it was how his friendship had led to her daughter becoming significantly more emotionally available over the last few months. Jane had wondered about it at first, given how uncomfortable Hermione had been in the past about even hugging her *parents* of her own accord, but after learning about Harry's past, Jane felt that she had a better idea as to why her daughter had done that.

She was giving Harry the physical comfort that his aunt and uncle had never bothered to give him...

Jane still couldn't quite believe that two human beings could treat their own nephew that way. She knew that Harry was telling the truth, of course- she'd asked Mr McNish about Harry's life during their first meeting all those months ago- but she still couldn't understand. What could they have hated so much about Harry?

Shaking off her musings, Jane glanced over at her daughter, who was sitting in the passenger seat beside her, Hermione hadn't talked much on the way back to their house; she kept on looking out the window, her chin in her hand and an almost blank expression on her face, as though thinking hard about something.

"Missing Harry, dear?" Jane asked eventually, breaking the silence.

"Horribly," Hermione said, sighing sadly as she stared out of the window. "He's my best friend, Mummy; I just wish he could have Christmas with a family that cared about him."

She looked over at her mother, pain evident in her eyes. "I just can't believe what the Dursleys put him through; his uncle's sister once gave him *dog biscuits* as a *Christmas* present. How could someone be so *mean*...?"

Jane sighed as she stared out at the road before her. "People can do cruel things sometimes, Hermione," she said, as she turned a corner. "Just be grateful Harry won't have to put up with it any more."

She smiled as she glanced over at her daughter. "Although you've certainly helped him deal with life away from them. Your dad and I are very proud of you for that, Hermione."

Hermione blushed slightly and turned to look back out of the window, a barely- audible "Thanks, mum," being muttered as she turned away.

She didn't know it, but Hermione's last words had given Jane cause to think...

As soon as her husband got home, she and Alan would need to have a talk.

Later that day, as Hermione sat upstairs in her room and read, Alan and Jane sat down in the kitchen, talking about Jane's recent suggestion.

"You're sure about this, Jane?" Alan asked, looking inquiringly at his wife. "I mean, can we handle another? The money's fine at the moment, but do we really have the finances to support him?"

Jane nodded. "I checked with our bank manager just to make sure before you got back; we might need to tighten our belts a little bit at first to accommodate him, but business seems to be going well, so we should be able to manage after a while."

"Well, that's good to know," Alan said, as he glanced up at the ceiling where his daughter sat in her room. He smiled slightly. "If nothing else, Hermione should be happy; she always wanted a sibling."

He glanced over at his wife. "So, when should we go over to the orphanage?"

"Tomorrow, I think," Jane replied. "I'm sure he'll want to come with us for Christmas; it doesn't sound like he's had very good ones in the past."

The next morning, Harry had just finished breakfast (A highly enjoyable plate of bacon and sausages), and was browsing through the orphanage library for something to read when he felt a light tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he was pleasantly surprised to be greeted by a mass of bushy brown hair in his face as the girl to whom the hair belonged hugged him tightly around the neck.

"H-Hermione?" he said, staring at her in confusion as she pulled back, grinning broadly at him. "What are you doing here?"

Hermione shrugged. "I'm not sure, really; Mummy and Daddy just seemed to decide that we should visit you today and asked me to

come and find you while they talked with Mr McNish,” she said, looking slightly apologetic at not knowing the answer to Harry’s question. “Shall we go and see them?”

Harry nodded. “Sure,” he said, smiling at his friend as they walked out of the library. “After all, I haven’t got anything else planned.”

As soon as the two small children stepped into the office, the Grangers and Mr McNish turned to look at them, Mr McNish smiling slightly at Harry.

“Ah, good, you found each other,” he said, before devoting his attention to the Grangers. “I’ll give you four a few minutes to talk things over; I’ll be in the entrance hall when you’re finished.”

As he walked out of the office and closed the door, Harry and Hermione could only stare at the Grangers in confusion.

“Is something wrong?” Hermione asked, looking at her parents inquiringly. “What were you talking to Mr McNish about?”

“Well... it’s about Harry, really,” Mr Granger said, looking at his daughter’s friend. “We wanted to ask you... would you like to come home with us?”

Hermione stared at her father as though he had just asked for directions to his own head.

“Of course he would,” she said, looking over at her friend with a smile. “Wouldn’t you, Harry? You always enjoyed mummy’s lasagna-”

“Hermione...” Mrs Granger said, looking over at her daughter.

“What?” Hermione answered, looking back at her mother. “Mummy, you’re making it too difficult. Of course Harry would like to come over for tea.”

Mrs Granger sighed, a slight smile on her face as though amazed at her daughter’s mistake, as she turned to look at Harry. “What my husband and I are *really* asking you, Harry, is... would you like to come and live with us?”

Harry's eyes widened.

He couldn't believe it... someone actually *wanted* him? *Him*? On some level, no matter how helpful Hermione had been for him, he was still that terrified little five-year-old who couldn't believe that anyone would ever actually *like* him...

But, right now, he was past that.

He was just a nearly six-and-a-half year-old boy, who'd just heard the most unexpected news of his life, and was only now realising that he had never been this happy.

"Are... are you saying... you want to adopt me?" he asked, looking at them with a slightly nervous aspect around him, as though he was afraid they were just going to laugh at him and this would all turn out to be some cruel joke...

Mr Granger nodded. "Yes, Harry, we are," he said, smiling slightly at the young boy. "That is, if you and Hermione wouldn't mind?"

"Mind?" Hermione asked, looking over at her parents incredulously. "Why would I mind? I finally get a brother, and it's *Harry*!"

She glanced over eagerly at her friend. "Please say yes, Harry, *please*..." she begged, staring at him with the same puppy-like eyes that always seemed to sway her parents around to their point of view whenever she and Harry wanted to go somewhere.

"I... uh... wow," Harry said, looking over at the Grangers in a daze. "I mean, I already think of Hermione as a sister, and it'd be *great* to be part of an actual... family... but are you sure you want me?"

Looking down at small child who might soon be his adopted son, Alan could barely stop himself from losing his temper at the 'guardians' who had given such a likeable child such a low opinion of himself.

"Trust me, Harry; we're sure," he said, smiling slightly at the little boy to reassure him. "We wouldn't have asked otherwise."

Harry swallowed slightly.

“Uh... could I just ask... for one thing?” he asked. “It’s just... well, I don’t really remember my parents... but, well, I like to think that they *did* care about me and the Dursleys just got me by accident... so... could I... maybe... keep my last name?”

He looked at the Grangers nervously, and Jane smiled reassuringly at the little boy.

“Of course you can, Harry,” she said, as Hermione looked over at Harry eagerly, biting her lip as though to stop herself from yelling for joy before she knew for sure either way.

Harry swallowed slightly, looked down at the ceiling as though trying to come to a decision, and then looked back up at Jane.

“Thanks... mum?” he said, an inquiring expression in his eyes as though he wanted to know if he should call her something else.

“YES!” Hermione cried, running over to Harry and hugging him tightly, grinning so hard that it almost seemed as though her head would break in half. Slightly awkwardly, surprised by the sheer intensity of her joy, Harry returned the hug, the faint glimmering of tears visible in the corners of his eyes as he looked back at the Grangers.

“Thank you...” he whispered to them, his attention consumed by the hug he was receiving from his new sister.

Alan smiled back at the small boy.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” he said, as he and his wife stood up. “We’ll just sort out the paperwork with Mr McNish, and then we can go home.

Home... Harry thought to himself, unable to keep himself squeezing Hermione even tighter as the sheer simple joy of the word filled him.

I have a home... a family...

Outside the office window, looking in at the two small children hugging gleefully, an old man smiled.

“Just the thing...” he mused to himself, as he studied a gold device in his pocket briefly before slipping it away again. “A few weeks to get him settled in, and then I’ll set those new wards up.”

He smiled at the thought. True, the spell work required for the new wards to be erected would take a lot out of him, but now that he felt as though he had the time to do so, he should be able to prepare them easily enough.

And then, Harry could have what Dumbledore had hoped he would be able to live all along.

A normal childhood.

Chapter 4 – Five Years Later

Five years later...

Sitting in the prison waiting room, staring angrily ahead of him, Rubeus Hagrid drummed his fingers impatiently on the table as he waited for the guards to bring in the man he was here to see. Normally these lengths weren't necessary to deliver a letter to a new student at Hogwarts- even the muggle-borns managed to work it out in the end- but when the student was Harry Potter...

Well, Dumbledore believed in making sure things went well. Given what had happened to put them in this position, Dumbledore acknowledged that the chances of Harry having been told the truth about himself were slim at best, but he still believed in making sure...

The door opened, and Vernon Dursley was led into the visitor's room, visibly fuming as his guard led him to the chair opposite Hagrid, his wrists bound by handcuffs and a swollen black eye on his face. Hagrid couldn't even be bothered ask what had happened; he and Dumbledore had already studied Vernon's prison record before Hagrid came here.

Although child abuse was a serious crime, under normal circumstances, Vernon might soon have been up for parole for good behaviour. However, he was as poor a prisoner as he had been a guardian for Harry; he constantly complained about everything, tried to intimidate some of the other prisoners to get his own way, and had more often than not beaten some of the less violent prisoners (Primarily the thieves). At the moment, his sentence still had ten years to go, although based on his record the prison governors were expecting it to be extended any day now.

His wife was probably the better off of the two of them; she was still in prison, but she at least was up for parole in a couple of months, even if it would only result in her being transferred to a mental asylum. Ever since she'd been separated from her husband and her son she'd mainly just kept to herself and often muttered about her 'dinky Diddums'; many thought that the trauma of what had happened had scarred her mind.

But Hagrid couldn't bring himself to pity her state; the only pity he had in this case was for Harry. Quite frankly, Hagrid hated even the *idea* of having to talk to this... *thing* that had been meant to look after Harry, after what he'd done to the poor kid, but it had to be done.

After the guard had left, Vernon looked up at Hagrid, a glare in his eyes.

"You are?" he asked contemptuously, as though he thought he was somehow better than Hagrid. The way he tried to hold himself, it was almost as though he thought their positions were reversed and *Hagrid* was the one behind the bullet-proof glass...

Hagrid just glared back; after all the time it had taken him to tame Fluffy, it took a lot to intimidate him.

"Names aren't important here, Dursley," he said, deciding not to bother with the formalities and just get down to business. "M here about Harry; we need ter know if he knows anything about who he is."

Vernon almost seemed to explode at that query.

"That ungrateful FREAK!" he roared, standing up and looking ready to punch something. "We took him out of the kindness of our hearts *and this is how he repays us!*"

"REPAYS YER!" Hagrid yelled, standing up to glare back at Vernon, uncaring of the fact that his head nearly touched the ceiling now that he was standing up. His temper was already short when it came to this bastard; he was just going to give this guy a piece of his mind and *then* finish the job he'd come here to do. "YOU TRIED TER BLOODY *MURDER* HIM, DURSLEY! AND IF I'D BEEN THERE YE'D HAVE GOTTEN OFF WORSE THAN YER ACTUALLY DID! NOW DOES HE OR DOES HE NOT KNOW ANYTHING!"

Slamming his hands against the glass, Vernon could only roar in rage at Hagrid, the sentence barely coherent due to the sheer volume of it in such an enclosed space. However, Hagrid was unconcerned about the specific details; he'd made out enough of the rantings to gather that the answer to his question was, indubitably, 'no'.

“Right,” he said, glaring back at Dursley. “I’ll leave ye, then.”

As he turned away from the most repulsive moral example of humanity he’d ever encountered, Hagrid put one hand into his pocket and felt the two letters there.

Well, he thought to himself, as he left the visitor’s room and nodded politely at the guard to show that he was finished, before he began to walk towards the entrance hall, *guess it’s up ter me ter fill ‘im in*.

He smiled at the thought. This part of the job may have been awkward, true, but he was eagerly anticipating the next bit.

After all, he’d been waiting for ages for the chance to meet the family who had taken Harry in as though he’d been their own...

“HARRY!” a voice called out eagerly. “Get *up*, will you; you can’t *still* be asleep at a time like this!”

Groaning, Harry blinked his eyes open, smiling slightly as he glanced around his room, no matter how blurry things were without his glasses. Even after five years living here, he still enjoyed the simple pleasure those words seemed to evoke whenever he thought them.

His room...

True, it hadn’t been much to start with- just the spare room beside Hermione’s bedroom with a bed, some shelves, and a desk in it- but Jane and Hermione had taken him shopping after they’d returned from Glasgow. Fortunately, Alan had called the rest of the family to let them know about the addition of Harry to the family, and the Grangers had all eagerly chipped in some money to help Harry acquire some extra items for his new room. Books, a radio, even a few CDs...

“Come *on*, little brother!” a voice said, as someone grabbed Harry’s bedcovers and yanked them off the bed, breaking off his train of reminiscing.

Rolling his eyes, Harry reached over, picked his glasses up off his bedside table, and glanced over in the direction of the speaker.

“Hermione,” he said, staring in exasperation at his ‘sister’, who was looking at him with an eager grin (And, Harry noted, still in her pyjamas; it must only be about nine), “could you *please* stop calling me ‘little’ brother? I’m only a *few* months younger than you!”

Hermione grinned teasingly back at him. “Like I said; *little* brother,” she said, as she stuck her tongue out at him.

“Right; that does it!” Harry said, as he grabbed his pillow and tossed it at Hermione, before jumping out of bed, tackling her to the ground, and beginning to tickle her mercilessly.

“H-H-Harry!” Hermione yelled, her voice barely audible over her laughter, “s-stop it, will you?”

Chuckling, Harry did as she asked, stood back up, and then hauled Hermione back onto her feet, chuckling as he saw her glaring in mock anger at him; they both knew ‘the glare’ never worked, but still tried to make the other feel bad after their now-typical ‘tickle matches’. Currently the score for the month was almost equal, although since it was only July 28th, they would probably have to start recounting soon.

“You know, you *really* need to try and change tactics if you want to catch me out,” Harry said, as he pulled on his dressing gown and walked downstairs with Hermione towards the kitchen; he could already smell Jane’s bacon and eggs. “That’s, what, the *sixtieth* time since we started this whole thing that you’ve tried to take me by surprise while I’m waking up? When will you learn that I wake up *faster* than you?”

Hermione shrugged dismissively. “It *does* work... well, most of the time, anyway,” she said, looking at Harry with a smile on her face. “You sleep in so much over the summer, the odds of you being *totally* alert at that hour are *very* slim!”

Harry sighed as he looked over at Hermione, but whatever reply he was about to make was stopped by Mrs Granger sticking her head out of the kitchen door and looking at them critically.

“Are you two going to keep arguing about tickle-fighting methods, or are you going to have your breakfast?” she said, smiling casually at her two children. “You two really need to start getting up earlier, or you’ll have started to miss *lunch!*”

She chuckled as her two children sat down for breakfast and began to pile the bacon and eggs onto their plates. “You should just be grateful your father and I haven’t decided what school we’ll be sending you two to yet; I’d be insisting you get up earlier than this to ensure you get into practice for when it starts.”

Harry and Hermione just glanced over at each other and exaggeratedly rolled their eyes; their parents were *always* going on about not having chosen their senior school yet. They’d taken a few entrance exams and passed them all with excellent marks, but other than that, they just didn’t have any real idea.

“Hey, where is Dad anyway?” Hermione asked, looking up at her mother.

“He had to go to work early; one of our patients needs to have a tooth extracted early today before a business meeting,” Mrs Granger explained, as she began to put the pans away. “Don’t worry, though; he’s agreed to take care of business while I keep an eye on you two today.”

She and Hermione briefly exchanged a knowing look; they both knew that Alan Granger had really just left early this morning to pick up Harry’s birthday presents without him knowing. The three of them had decided what they’d give him the previous evening while Harry had been reading a Sherlock Holmes book in his room-*The Sign of Four*, if Hermione remembered correctly-, and Alan had volunteered to pick the presents up the next morning.

“So, anything in particular on today?” Harry asked, looking over at his adopted mother inquiringly.

Mrs Granger opened her mouth to reply, but then a loud, resounding knock at the door drowned out all other sounds in the house.

“What the...?” Hermione said, as she glanced over at her mother.
“Were you expecting anyone, Mum?”

“No...” Mrs Granger said, puzzled, as she stood up from where she’d sat down opposite her children and headed for the door, followed by Harry and Hermione. She opened the door just as another knock was beginning...

Chapter 5 – Meetings and Revelations

And suddenly, the three Grangers (Well, two Grangers and one Potter) found themselves staring up at a tall man in a massive brown coat with a huge black beard, easily tall enough to touch the hall ceiling just by standing up.

“Ah, ye’re in!” the man said, smiling brightly at Mrs Granger before he looked past her at the two children, who were staring at the ‘giant’ in shock, and grinned even wider. “Harry! *There* ye are!” He chuckled slightly as the nearly-eleven-year-old’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Ye, I know you don’t remember me, but I did last see yer when you was only a baby,” the man explained as he walked into the house, smiling slightly as he got a closer look at Harry. “Ye look a lot like yer dad, but ye’ve got yer mum’s eyes.”

Harry’s eyes widened.

“You... you knew my parents?” he asked, staring at the man in surprise. He loved the Grangers like they *were* his family, of course, but it didn’t stop him from wondering what his *birth* parents had been like.

“Course I knew ‘em!” the giant smiled, before he glanced over at Mrs Granger. “Sorry to interrupt, Mrs Granger, but kin I come in? I’ve got a lot ter talk about, and it needs ter be said to all three of yer- I’m guessing yer husband’s not in?”

Mrs Granger nodded, a slightly dazed expression on her face.

“C... come in, Mr...” she asked as she stepped aside.

“Rubeus Hagrid,” the man said, smiling as he stepped into the hall (Harry and Hermione noted that their assumptions about his height were correct; his head nearly touched the ceiling). “Keeper of the Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts- don’t worry, yer wouldn’t know of it,” he added, noting everyone’s confused expressions. “I’ve got some stuff ter say that ye all may find hard to believe, but trust me; it’s true.”

He glanced around the house. "Anywhere in partic'lar we c'n talk?"

"Well... the kitchen seems best; Harry and Hermione were just starting breakfast," Mrs Granger said by way of explanation, as she indicated the room in question. "Uh... I'm not sure if any of our chairs will..." she began, before stopping; evidently, she wasn't sure how to phrase her comment without sounding insulting.

Hagrid, however, just smiled. "That'll support my weight?" he asked, smiling politely. "Eh, no worries; I'll just stand."

"Um... OK..." Harry said, as he and Hermione sat back down at the table to eat. "So... how did you know my parents?"

"As I said, I'm Keeper of the Keys at Hogwarts; it's the school that yer parents went ter," Hagrid explained, as Mrs Granger sat down beside her children, looking at Hagrid curiously. "Knew when they were there, and only got ter know 'em better after they left." He chuckled slightly, as though at a fond memory, as he looked at Harry. "They were great people, Harry; ye should be proud o' them."

"Really?" Harry asked, trying to conceal his eagerness to avoid hurting Mrs Granger's feelings; he was fairly sure she'd understand his desire to know, of course, but he still didn't want to hurt her feelings. "Uh... what were they like?"

Hagrid smiled slightly at that. "Simple question to answer, Harry," he said, as he looked at the young boy. "They were the best witch and wizard of their ages I've ever seen."

"Oh, and ye and yer sister should be brilliant too, once ye've spent some time at Hogwarts," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Harry was grateful he'd just swallowed his bacon before Hagrid had finished speaking; he'd most likely have choked on it from surprise at that last statement. Glancing over at Hermione, he noticed her coughing slightly, and gave her a hard thump on the back until she could breath again.

"Wh... what?" Mrs Granger spoke. Glancing over in her direction, Harry saw that his adopted mother was staring at Hagrid with wide eyes; she must have been as surprised at his statement as he was.

Hagrid just smiled at the three of them. "Yeah, I know it's a bit o' a surprise, but trust me; yer children *are* a witch nd a wizard," he smiled, as he reached into his pockets and pulled out two letters. "And thumpin' good 'uns, I'll wager, once ye've both been trained up a bit. Anyway, now I reckon it's time ye got yer letters."

Taking the letters from Hagrid, Harry and Hermione opened them with a confused glanced over at each other, took the paper inside out, and began to read.

HOGWARTS
of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

SCHOOL

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock,
Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter/ Miss Granger,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

*Minerva
Deputy Headmistress*

McGonagall,

Harry and Hermione could only stare between the letters and each other, before Hermione looked up at Hagrid in confusion.

"Mr Hagrid, couldn't you be... well, making a mistake?" she asked the large man before her as politely as she could. "I mean, even if Harry's

parents *were* a witch and a wizard, how could I be a witch? As much as I love Harry, I'm not his *biological* sister..."

"Oh, family don't matter to magic!" Hagrid smiled, indicating Harry. "I mean, Harry's mum was just as muggle as you, and she ended up being Head Girl o' Hogwarts when she graduated!"

"Really?" Hermione said, staring at Hagrid with a slight smile on her face, along with her typically eager-yet-inquiring expression that she always assumed when she wanted to know more about something, but Harry interrupted.

"Uh... what does it mean, they await our owl?" he asked in confusion.

"Oh yeah, I'll 'ave to remember ter attend ter that in Diagon Alley," Hagrid said, as he glanced over at Mrs Granger. "Would ye and yer husband be available ter come down ter London with the kids any time soon? They'll need ter pick up their school supplies, and-"

"Uh... Hagrid?" Harry put in, looking over at the giant with a slightly apologetic look. "I... you must have made a mistake. I mean, Hermione and I... we're just, well... *us*. We can't be... *magic*..."

Hagrid just chuckled slightly. "Can't be magic, eh? Ever made anything happen? Something you couldn't explain?"

Harry was about reply in the negative, but stopped himself as he thought back to his time in the Dursleys. Come to think of it, anything that had made them *particularly* angry at him had always occurred when he'd been upset or angry at them... That incident with the pot of boiling water (*Funny what you remember after so long*, Harry thought to himself) had occurred just after Aunt Petunia would only give him a lump of bread when she was preparing lasagna for Dudley...

And even since his adoption, whenever someone tried to pick on him or Hermione in school, he recalled that something always seemed to happen to them. One bully's hand had suddenly caught fire after grabbing Hermione roughly and trying to shove her to the side... another had been left dazed and confused when he tried to attack Harry up for not letting him cheat off Harry in a test, apparently just from making eye contact with Harry... And on this one occasion when

a teacher had accused them of cheating and made them both sit a harder test, hadn't he ending up getting several drawing pins sticking into his legs when he sat down?

Glancing over at Hermione, he noticed a similar inspiration apparently striking her, and swallowed as they glanced back at Hagrid, who just chuckled slightly.

"See?" he said, apparently guessing their train of thought. "Not magical, indeed... just wait, you two'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

"What?" Hermione said, looking at Hagrid in confusion. "Famous? For what?"

"For what Harry did, o'course!" Hagrid said, smiling as he indicated Harry. Then his face fell as a thought occurred to him. "Oh, righ'... there's not been anybody ter tell ye, has there?"

"Tell me what?" Harry asked, looking at Hagrid curiously. "What did I do?"

Hagrid sighed as he looked around the room. "Well, I don't if I'm quite the one ter tell ye this, Harry, but ye can't go off ter Hogwarts *not* knowing..."

He swallowed as he looked around. "See- years 'n years ago, there was this wizard who went- bad. As bad as yer could get. Worse. His name was-" he shuddered slightly "-*Voldemort*."

He looked at the children nervously. "Don't make me say it again, Harry; nobody likes ter say it if they don't have ter. Anyway, he started ter gather some followers; either they wanted a bit o' his power, or they were just scared. Anyone tried ter stand up ter 'im... and 'e killed them. Died horribly, the most of 'em. Some places—Hogwarts, fer one-You-Know-Who couldn't get ter. E'eryone reckons Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever afraid of...

"Then there was yer parents, Harry. Don't know why he didn't try ter kill 'em earlier; probably s'pected they was too close to Dumbledore. He'da bin right too; they'd stopped some of his plans themselves at least three times already."

Harry swallowed slightly, only vaguely registering that Hermione had taken his hand and was giving it a comforting squeeze. As incredible as it was to finally hear *something* about his parents- apart from the occasional wild rant from the Dursleys that he'd never paid much attention to- it was still tempered by the fact that something terrible must have happened to them...

"Anyway," Hagrid continued, "one Halloween night, he came ter yer parent's hidin' spot. Anyway, he came ter yer house and fought yer parents. Put up a good fight too, from the looks o' the place. He 'n yer dad dueled. And You-Know-Who —"

Hagrid broke up as his shoulders shook for a moment, taking a large handkerchief out of his pocket and blowing his nose.

"Sorry," he said, looking at Mrs Granger sheepishly as she stared at him slightly critically after blowing his nose so loudly. "It's just... sad. His parents were some o' the nicest people I'd ever met, and You-Know-Who just... just killed 'em! He killed yer dad first- we think he put up a good fight, but we found yer dad on the ground floor, murdered... and we found yer mum up top, not two feet from you.

"You-Know-Who killed everyone 'e ever set out ter, but after he'd killed yer parents.... He turned his wand on you- nobody's really sure why. He cast the same curse that he'd used ter kill 'undreds of the best wizards in the world, yer mum and dad included—and it failed. From what Professor Dumbledore says, the curse backfired on him, just bounced righ' off o' yeh. That's the truly 'stoundin' thing—You-Know-Who, the most evil wizard o' all time, toppled by a little boy. He lost his powers, vanished—all you got was that scar on yer head."

Reaching up to his forehead with his free hand, Harry gently touched the scar on his forehead. At least *that* mystery was cleared up; he'd never understood how a car crash could give him a scar like that, no matter how often he'd read up on cars in his spare time...

Noting her brother's distraction, Hermione took up the questioning, looking inquiringly at Hagrid.

“And... what happened to Vold-” she began, but stopped when she saw Hagrid flinch. “Sorry, I mean, You-Know-Who, after he tried to kill Harry?”

“Good question, Hermione,” Hagrid said, looking over at her with a slightly approving expression, evidently proud of her getting to the heart of the matter. “Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill Harry. Makes yer brother even more famous; nobody’s really clear on how it happened, ter be honest.

“Some say he died; codswallop, in my opinion. Don’t know if he had enough human left in him ter die. Most think he’s still out there, somehow, but lost his powers; too weak ter carry on...”

Hagrid shrugged and looked over at Harry. “Anyway, that’s not all that important now, is it? What I need ter know is, are the two of ye interested in going ter Hogwarts, or shall I just let Dumbledore know ye’re not interested?”

Harry and Hermione looked over at each other for a few moments, and then Hermione shrugged.

“Well, we’ve already taken everything normal school has to offer us and come out on top; why don’t we try something else?” she said casually, as she looked over at her brother.

Harry smiled back at her, and then glanced over at Mrs Granger.

“Well, Mum?” he asked, looking at her with a slightly hopeful expression. He’d really enjoy the chance to learn more about the world his parents came from and the school they’d gone to...

And, of course, the chance to learn something new and unexpected wasn’t exactly unappealing to him either.

Mrs Granger looked at her two children’s eager faces, and then glanced over at Hagrid.

“What are the school fees like?” she asked.

Hagrid smiled. "Oh, no need ter worry about that; James 'n Lily sent some money ter Hogwarts ter cover their kid's school fees as soon as they got hitched. Harry's fees are already paid up, 'n as for Hermione..."

He shrugged. "Well, they always wanted ter have another kid once the war was over; I'm sure they wouldn't mind the money they deposited fer that kid being used ter cover Hermione."

Mrs Granger sighed as she looked over at her children, and then smiled and looked back at Hagrid.

"Well, let's be off," she said, looking over at Harry and Hermione. "I'll call your father while you two finish breakfast; I'm sure we can reschedule a few appointments for an occasion like this."

"YES!" Harry and Hermione cried, leaping out of their seats and running over to hug their mother, Hagrid just smiling as Mrs Granger hugged her children back, a small smile on her face.

Chapter 6 – Diagon Alley

An hour later, the Grangers and Harry were standing on the London Underground, looking around themselves and trying not to pay too much attention to Hagrid, who was squatting over two seats drumming his fingers impatiently as he stared around at the carriage.

Having managed to call Alan, Mrs Granger had eventually persuaded her husband to close down the office for the day and come home for a proper explanation. Having met Hagrid, Mr Granger was initially sceptical, but after Hagrid had proved his story by enlarging and shrinking a few of the apples on the table (Apologising for the lack of anything more elaborate; he had apparently been expelled in his third year for some reason), Alan had been more prepared to accept Hagrid's story, no matter how confusing it was to believe that his adopted son had saved the world when he was barely a year old, and had agreed to join his wife and children in purchasing their new school supplies.

If only Hagrid would stop looking around the carriage with an expression that resembled a man who regularly enjoyed horse races being forced to watch snails compete against each other; it seemed as though Hagrid was used to getting around a lot faster than the normal- or rather 'muggle', Harry reminded himself- way.

Finally, they reached their stop and Hagrid walked out of the carriage, followed by the Grangers as Hagrid stretched slightly and began to walk over to the stairs leading to the streets.

"I don't know *how* the muggles manage without magic," he said, as the five of them began to walk up the stairs; nobody had the heart to point out to Hagrid that you weren't meant to walk up a broken escalator, particularly the *down* escalator.

After a brief walk through central London, Harry and Hermione staring around at the shops as Hagrid led the way and Alan and Jane trying their best to look inconspicuous despite their rather unusual companion, Hagrid finally stopped and smiled.

“Here it is,” he said, grinning as he glanced back at the children and their parents. “The Leaky Cauldron. It’s a famous place.”

Standing in front of them was a rather shabby-looking pub, comparatively small and insignificant when compared to the bookshop and the record store on either side of it. Harry was surprised at the lack of attention it seemed to be attracting, but then again, given that Alan and Jane seemed to be pretty confused even though he and Hermione were perfectly fine, maybe ‘muggles’ just couldn’t see it without help...

“Just take yer kids hands ‘n follow me,” Hagrid said, smiling back at them as he walked towards the door of the pub, Harry taking Jane’s hand and following as Hermione grabbed her father’s hand.

As soon as they entered the pub, the barman glanced over at Hagrid- there were only around half a dozen witches and wizards visible at the immediate moment- and, raising a glass, called out “The usual, Hagrid?”

Hagrid chuckled slightly as he patted Harry’s shoulder. “Can’t, Tom; Hogwarts business.”

“Bless my soul...” the barman said, as his eyes suddenly fell on Harry’s forehead. “Harry Potter... what an honour...”

The entire bar had suddenly gone quiet at the barman’s words, everyone turning to look at the door. Harry was briefly tempted to try and hide behind Hagrid to avoid being seen, no matter how childish it might appear, but the barman was too fast for that, dashing out from behind the bar to grab Harry’s hand and shake it, tears in his eyes.

“Welcome back, Mr Potter, welcome back...”

“Uh... thanks,” Harry said, smiling slightly sheepishly at the barman as the rest of the bar turned to look at him. He vaguely noticed Hermione smile over at him in a lightly teasing manner- she knew Harry hated getting too much attention- while Alan and Jane looked around the bar incredulously at how many people suddenly seemed to want to come over and shake hands with their son.

“Doris Crockford, Mr Potter, can’t believe I’m meeting you at last...”

“We can’t thank you enough for what you did, Mr Potter...”

“Delighted, Mr Potter, absolutely delighted...”

Fortunately, Harry managed to escape from the numerous wizards eager to shake his hand when a tall man wearing a rather odd purple turban walked past them and was promptly grabbed by Hagrid.

“Professor Quirrell!” Hagrid grinned under his beard, smiling as he glanced back at Harry and Hermione. “Harry, Hermione, Professor Quirrell will be one of yer teachers at Hogwarts.”

“P-P-P-Potter,” Quirrell said, smiling slightly at Harry. “G-G-G-Good t-t-t-to m-m-m-meet you.”

“Uh... same here,” Harry said, declining to offer the man his hand; if he shook any more hands he worried that his wrist might fall off.

“What do you teach?” Hermione asked, looking at Quirrell inquiringly, evidently eager to get a better idea of the subjects in her new school.

“D-D-D-D-Defence A-A-Against the D-D-D-Dark A-A-A-Arts,” Quirrell replied, looking at Hermione in confusion. “Y-y-y-you are?”

“Oh, sorry; I’m Hermione Granger, Harry’s sister,” Hermione replied, smiling up at Quirrell and holding out her own hand.

“Adopted,” Jane supplied, noting Quirrell’s confused expression. “We took Harry in when he was about six, and he’s lived with us ever since.”

“Ah,” Quirrell said, nodding in understanding, apparently ignoring Hermione’s hand. “Well, I’d b-b-b-b-best be o-o-off. I h-h-h-have t-t-t-to p-p-p-pick up a n-n-n-new b-b-b-b-book on v-v-v-v-vampires m-m-m-m-myself.” He looked terrified at the very thought.

“Ah,” Hagrid said, nodding as well before shrugging and patting Harry on the shoulder. “Anyway, best be off; lots ter do, things ter buy... Come on, all.”

“Well, that was... unexpected,” Alan commented, as they walked out into the alleyway behind the pub. “Is my son *really* that well-known, or was all that somehow pre-arranged?”

“Nope; all chance, I assure ye,” Hagrid said, smiling as he pulled out his umbrella and began to count the bricks on the wall in the front of him. “Yer son saved us all, Mr Granger; ye’d be hard-pressed these days ter find a witch or wizard who doesn’t know his name.”

Hermione chuckled slightly as she glanced over at Harry.

“Looks like you’re out of luck, little brother!” she said, affectionately squeezing his shoulder. “No more hiding in the corner to avoid attention now!”

“I’m not *that* bad, Hermione!” Harry said, glaring over at his sister as Hagrid counted bricks along the wall in front of them after finding a certain height on the wall to their left. “I just... well... hate people making a big deal about me, you *know* that. You’re the one who -”

However, Harry’s next statement was destined never to be revealed, as Hagrid found a certain brick and tapped it three times. To the amazement of the others, the wall suddenly opened up right in front of their eyes, the bricks folding back like someone spreading aside the leaves in a bush with their hands, until the hole in the wall had gone from a single brick to something that could easily accommodate Hagrid even with Alan and Jane on either side of him.

“Welcome,” Hagrid said, smiling at the other four as he indicated the long, winding street before them, crammed full of all kinds of people in various different-coloured robes, “to Diagon Alley.”

“Wow...” Harry and Hermione said as they glanced over at each other, their parents staring around the alleyway as Hagrid walked along. Suddenly, Mr Granger stopped as his eyes fell on a price label on a cauldron in the street, and he glanced over at Hagrid with a slightly concerned expression.

“Uh... Hagrid...” he said, slightly uncertain about addressing their new acquaintance merely by his surname, even if he’d insisted upon

it, “these ‘galleons’ and ‘sickles’ mentioned on the price labels... I presume they’re wizard currency?”

Hagrid smiled at the man’s slight panic.

“Oh, don’t worry about that; ye can change yer muggle money for wizard money in Gringotts,” the gamekeeper explained, indicating a large white building at the end of the alley. “And even if yer couldn’t, well, James ‘n Lily left Harry a decent amount of money that’s still in the vault; it should be enough ter cover school supplies.”

Harry’s eyes widened in shock as he processed Hagrid’s comment.

“I... I have a vault?” he said, looking over at Hagrid enquiringly.

“Oh yeah; pretty big amount of cash in it too, as I recall,” Hagrid said, as he reached inside his coat and, after a moment’s searching, pulled out a small gold key, which he passed to Harry. “Here’s the key fer the vault; just show it ter the goblins in the entrance and they’ll take it from there.”

“Uh... goblins?” Hermione asked, glancing over at Hagrid in surprise. “Did you say ‘goblins’?”

“Yeah, so ye’d be mad ter try and rob Gringotts; they’re even meant ter have dragons guarding the vaults,” Hagrid said, chuckling slightly. “Blimey, I’d love a dragon.”

“A *dragon*!” Jane said, staring at Hagrid in shock.

“Wanted one ever since I was a kid- ah, here we are,” Hagrid said, as they entered the main door of the bank.

Looking around at the various short, long-nosed, long-eared creatures stamping books all around them, in a hall that was at least as large as their entire house, Harry and Hermione couldn’t help but move slightly closer to each other for comfort; they’d always gone to each other for general comfort rather than their parents ever since the adoption. They mainly attributed this detail to the fact that it had been Hermione who had helped Harry get over his initial feelings of inadequacy caused by the Dursleys; Hermione had been his first

source of physical comfort, and she had, ever since, been his most constant one.

Reaching the main desk, Hagrid placed a hand down on the table and looked at the goblin sitting there, who put down his quill and looked up at Hagrid in a relaxed manner, as though this sort of thing happened all the time.

"Mr Harry Potter wishes to make a withdrawal, and his guardians wish to exchange muggle money for wizarding," Hagrid said, looking at the goblin with a respectful expression.

"Do you have his key?" the goblin inquired.

"Uh... right here, sir," Harry said, holding up the key that Hagrid had given him and passing it to the goblin, who studied it briefly.

"Very well," he said, passing it back to Harry.

"And I've got some business to attend to, on Professor Dumbledore's orders," Hagrid said, as he picked a piece of paper out of another pocket and gave it to Griphook. "It's about the you-know-what in vault seven hundred and thirteen."

The goblin briefly studied the note, and then nodded as he looked back at Hagrid.

"Very well," he said. "That seems to be in order. I will have someone take you to both vaults. Griphook!"

Griphook was yet another goblin, who took Harry, Hagrid and Hermione to a door in the hall while Jane and Alan stayed with the original goblin to change their money. Going through the door, Harry and Hermione were surprised to find themselves in a narrow stone passageway lit by various torches, a cart already waiting for them. As soon as all four of them were in it, the cart- apparently of its own accord- began to move, plunging along the rails that it stood on with a speed that made most roller coasters seem slow, taking corners so fast that Hermione was amazed they didn't fall off. Harry briefly thought about asking Hagrid if this was normal, but when he saw the

gamekeeper's rather green face, he decided not to and just held on as tight as possible.

Eventually, the cart stopped and the four passengers got out, Hagrid leaning dizzily against the wall as Griphook took Harry's key and opened the vault before them. Green smoke billowed out as the door opened, and as the contents were revealed, Harry and Hermione could only stare in amazement at the mass of gold, silver and bronze coins that were piled up inside the vault.

"Whoa..." Hermione said, as she glanced over at her brother. "Can you *believe* this?"

"Yeah, I know," Harry replied, as he stared at the coins before looking back at Hagrid and Griphook. "And *all* this is mine?"

"Indeed," Griphook said, nodding at the young wizard. "It was a significant amount to begin with, but with over ten years' worth of interest to take into consideration, it is one of, if not the, largest under-age account we possess."

"Incredible..." Hermione said again, as she and Harry began to grab a few handfuls of each kind of coin and stuff them into their pockets. After they'd run out of space to put the money in question, Harry and Hermione returned to the cart, Hagrid looking distinctly green as they began to hurtle along the rails at an ever-increasing speed, going deeper and deeper until they finally stopped in front of the infamous vault seven hundred and thirteen.

As Griphook walked up to the door and stroked it with a single finger, the door opened, to reveal...

Neither child could conceal their slight disappointment; there was nothing there but a small package wrapped in brown paper, which Hagrid picked up and slipped into his pocket.

"What's-" Hermione began, but Hagrid shook his head.

"Best yer don't know," he said simply. "C'mon, let's get back te yer parents, and don't talk on the way back, it's best if I keep m'mouth shut."

A few minutes later, Harry and Hermione were untied with Alan and Jane, staring around Diagon Alley as Hagrid stood beside them, still a bit unsteady on his legs.

“Look, why don’t you two get yer uniforms while yer parents and I attend ter potion ingredients?” Hagrid said, indicating a shop called *Madam Malkin’s Robes For All Occasions*. “We’ll meet yer there in a few minutes, OK?”

Harry nodded in agreement- he and Hermione always enjoyed the chance to do something on their own, no matter what it was- and he and Hermione headed for the shop in question.

“Hogwarts, dears?” a squat, smiling witch who they presumed was Madam Malkin asked them as they stepped in. “We’ve got everything here- there’s another young man being fitted up just now, but we can attend to you both as well easily enough.”

Harry and Hermione were guided to the back of the shop, where a boy with almost platinum-coloured hair and a pale, pointed face was also getting his robes done. Harry and Hermione were each positioned on stools near the boy as Madam Malkin and one of her helpers slipped long black robes over them and began to pin them to the right lengths.

“Hello,” the boy said, nodding at them briefly. “Hogwarts as well?”

“Yeah,” Harry said dismissively, as Hermione nodded.

“My parents are just picking up some essentials and then I’ll be dragging them over to look at brooms,” the boy explained. “It’s totally unfair that first years aren’t allowed their own; I think I’ll persuade my father to get me one and I’ll smuggle it in somehow.”

Harry and Hermione briefly exchanged a look; both of them were uncomfortably reminded of Dudley Dursley’s habit of getting everything he wanted regardless of whether he should have it or not.

“Have you got your own brooms?” the boy asked.

Harry shrugged. "Not really; we haven't really had the opportunity to get any practice," he said dismissively; he was already wishing this boy would shut up and leave them alone.

"Oh, you know each other?" the boy said, looking at them with an idle curiosity, almost like he was only asking the question because he felt it was expected of him rather than actual interest.

"Actually, he's my adopted brother," Hermione said, indicating Harry. Harry was relieved to note that she hadn't given the boy his name; despite the earlier teasing, she clearly respected his wishes for anonymity.

"Really?" the boy said, looking at Harry as though he was a minor intellectual curiosity. "What happened to your *real* parents?"

"Dead," Harry said simply.

"Oh, sorry," the boy said, without sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

"A witch and a wizard, if you mean that," Harry said, exchanging an exasperated glance with Hermione; this guy was proving less and less likeable with every passing minute.

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're not the same, they haven't been raised to know our ways; some of them haven't even heard of Hogwarts before receiving the letter. They really should just keep it in the old wizarding families...."

Harry and Hermione glanced over at each other with a slight degree of shock; this guy was starting to sound almost... *racist* towards non-magical families.

It's official; we are never going to get along with this guy, Harry thought to himself. The boy was just about to open his mouth to ask another question when Madam Malkin said "That's you two done, dears," and Harry and Hermione jumped off the stools, paid for their robes, and headed out into the street, where they soon met up with the Grangers and Hagrid outside the Potions supply shop.

"Is something wrong, Harry?" Alan asked, noticing the slight edginess in his adopted son's stance.

"Mmm? Oh, it's nothing, Dad; just a bit of an unpleasant reminder," Harry said, indicating the robe shop. "Hermione and I just had an unpleasant encounter with some kid who was acting a bit too racist for my liking..."

"What, going on about how muggle families shouldn't be allowed in?" Hagrid asked, chuckling slightly at Harry and Hermione's slight discomfort. "No need ter fret; there's still the occasional family that thinks that way, but most people these days know that blood don't make a blind bit o' difference."

He patted Hermione reassuringly on the shoulder, and indicated another shop called Flourish & Blots. "Anyway, we've still got a few details ter attend to before we're done."

Browsing through the shop was interesting, to say the least, although Harry did get a bit embarrassed when Hermione found a few passages relating to him in at least three books she picked up out of casual interest; *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*. Harry had thought about getting them to do some research into his past, but had eventually decided it wasn't worth the hassle; if nothing else, how many people would actually *know* about the events of that night beyond him and Voldemort? They did pick up a couple of copies of a book called *Hogwarts: A History* that looked rather interesting, as well as one or two other interesting-looking books, but other than that the only books that they purchased were those on the school list.

The stop-off at the cauldron shop was relatively brief, but Harry hadn't been expecting much from that anyway.

Outside the shop, Hagrid checked their lists again.

"Just one or two things left ter pick up..." he muttered to himself, before glancing over at Alan and Jane. "I've just got something ter check on with Hermione. Alan, you should go along with Harry ter pick up his wand; Jane, I'd appreciate ye coming along with me, 'n then I'll go along with Hermione ter get her own wand."

“Sounds fine,” Alan said, nodding in approval at the suggestion; Harry briefly got the impression that something about this had been discussed earlier while he wasn’t there, but shook it off as unimportant. “Come on Harry, let’s go.”

After a short walk, Harry was standing with his adopted father outside a narrow, shabby shop which, according to the peeling gold lettering above it, was ‘Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.’ A lone wand lay on a once gleaming purple pillow that had faded in the incessant sunlight over the years.

The inside of the shop was even smaller, consisting of only a small patch of empty floor while the surrounding walls were covered in various long thin boxes that must hold the wands in question. Besides a small chair near a window, the only furniture in the room was a desk, where an old man with slightly curly white hair and gleaming eyes stood, looking at them.

“Good afternoon,” he said simply, before walking forward slightly to look at them.

“Um... hello,” Alan said, after a moment’s pause. “We’re here to get a wand for my son.”

“Ah yes,” the man said, nodding as he looked at Harry. “Harry Potter. I was wondering when I would be seeing you. It seems merely a day ago when your parents were in here buying their first wands. Your mother, ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Delightful wand for charms work, it was. And so was she. By contrast, your father favoured an eleven inch mahogany wand, quite pliable, more powerful than your mother’s and excellent for transfiguration, as he himself was. Well, I say your father favoured it... it’s the wand that chooses the wizard, of course.”

He sighed slightly as he indicated Harry’s scar.

“I’m sorry to say I sold the wand that did that,” he said, noting Harry’s brief confusion. “Thirteen and a half inches, yew and phoenix feather—extraordinarily powerful. In the wrong hands... it has most disastrous results, as I’m sure you’re aware, Mr. Potter. If I’d known what that wand was going out into the world to do...”

After a moment's pause, the man simply stepped back and smiled slightly at Harry. "Well, Mr. Potter, let us have a look then. Which is your wand arm?"

"Well... I'm right handed?" Harry said, hoping he'd understood right.

"That is it then," Ollivander's voice intoned. Harry got chills down his spine whenever Ollivander spoke... "Hold out your arm."

Harry and Alan could only watch in confusion as the tape-measure began to take all kinds of random measurements, totally independent of Mr Ollivander, as he began to explain briefly about the cores used for the wands in question before he began to pass Harry wand after wand. Maple with phoenix feather, beechwood with dragon heartstring, ebony and unicorn hair... after a while, Harry just blanked out the exact descriptions and just focused on waving the wands, each time resulting in them getting snatched out of Harry's hand to be replaced by the next, apparently making Mr Ollivander slightly happier with each wand.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the wand for you yet... I wonder... yes, why not... holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, try it."

As Harry took the wand, he instantly felt a warmth spread through his fingers. Raising the wand and bringing it down, he was instantly rewarded by a stream of sparks, as well as a relieved clap from Alan, as Mr Ollivander nodded thoughtfully, muttering "Curious... very curious..."

"Uh... what's curious?" Harry said, looking at Ollivander in confusion.

"That one, Mr. Potter, has a brother. It is curious indeed that you are destined for that wand, when its brother- why, it's brother gave you that scar."

He smiled slightly as he looked at Harry. "I feel we can expect great things from you, Harry Potter. After all, He Who Must Not Be Named did great things. Terrible, yes, but great."

Shivering slightly, Harry was relieved that Hermione and Jane chose that moment to come back; Hagrid had volunteered to take their belongings back to their house himself, assuring them that they could get back to the muggle world easily without him, and had given Harry and Hermione the tickets they'd need for the train to school. Hermione's wand was quickly discovered- vine wood with dragon heartstring- and then the Grangers returned to the Leaky Cauldron, where they purchased a small dinner with the last of Alan and Jane's galleons.

However, even as he chewed on his burger, Harry couldn't stop himself worrying about the future. He'd just had one of the most incredible days of his life, and yet...

He sighed.

"Harry?" Alan said, looking over in concern at his son. "Are you all right?"

Harry chewed thoughtfully on his burger for a few moments, unsure how to really explain how he felt, before looking back at Alan.

"It's just... everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last. "Mr Ollivander, Professor Quirrell, all those people in the Leaky Cauldron... but I don't even remember why. I can't even do any magic yet; I feel like they're all expecting me to be a new Merlin and I haven't even cast a single spell. I'm famous and I have no real memory of what I'm famous *for*. I can't even remember what happened the night Voldemort killed... well, killed my parents."

Alan smiled affectionately at the child who'd been as good as his own for the past five years and, reaching over, affectionately ruffled Harry's hair.

"Don't worry about it, Harry; it's always hard to be singled out, no matter what the reason is. Everyone starts at the beginning some time; I mean, imagine what we might be going through if you weren't here to help provide us with a better link to this world," he said, indicating Hermione, who was animatedly talking with her mother about her new books. "You and Hermione have always been bright at

school, and I have no doubt that you'll both do well now, no matter how difficult it seems at first."

Harry smiled back. "Thanks, Dad," he said.

"You're welcome," Alan replied, before sighing in an exaggerated manner. "Of course, it's a pity we already got your birthday presents; they might seem pretty tame after this."

"No way," Harry chuckled, shaking his head. "Trust me, I'll be fine with whatever you get me."

As the conversation turned back to minor details, such as birthdays and magic, none of the people sitting there could ever have known what would happen in the upcoming year...

Chapter 7 – Platform Nine and Three Quarters

The next month or so at the Granger household was spent with Harry and Hermione doing a significant amount of research into the magical world, both while studying their own coursework and in doing a bit of independent research while studying some of the extra books. Hermione had once or twice asked Harry if he was sure he didn't want to check up a few extra books to find out additional information about his defeat of Voldemort, but Harry had declined; he knew the essentials, and that was enough.

Despite this little disagreement between him and his sister, everything had gone well; Harry had been particularly excited when his birthday had come around and he'd received an extra present that had been purchased in Diagon Alley by Hagrid, Jane and Hermione while Harry and Alan had been purchasing Harry's wand. The present in question was a beautiful snowy owl, which Harry had named Hedwig, and which he'd agreed to share with Hermione until she could get an owl of her own. With her inclusion in their lives, Harry quickly got used to cleaning out his room on his own, as Hedwig kept on bringing back dead mice and he had to clean them out before Jane found them; she'd never been comfortable around mice ever since a nasty experience as a child.

Despite these minor distractions over the next month or so, the books provided the main source of interest for the two children as they waited for their new school year to start. Harry particularly enjoyed *Magical Theory* by Adalbert Waffling and *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration* by Emeric Switch, while Hermione favoured *The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1)* by Miranda Goshawk and *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phyllida Spore; it reminded her of the times she'd cooked with her mother. The two of them spent a great deal of time giving each other little pop quizzes on some of the topics to practice, with their parents sometimes helping them come up with questions.

All too soon, it was the first of September, and Alan and Jane were driving their children off to King's Cross Station to catch the train to Hogwarts. Harry and Hermione had left their school uniforms at the

top of their trunks, reasoning that they'd just change on the train, and were both eagerly anticipating what their new school would be like.

Having reached King's Cross, and with their luggage now unloaded, Harry carrying Hedwig's cage while Alan took his trunk and Hermione dragged her own along, they began walking along to platform nine and ten, where, according to the ticket, their platform- Platform Nine and Three Quarters- should be located...

But there was nothing there.

"What in the world...?" Hermione said, staring at her ticket in confusion as she glanced back up at the railway before them, just in case they'd missed something. However, nothing seemed to have changed; it still went from platform nine to platform ten, as smoothly as you like, with nothing in between the two.

"Maybe someone made a printing mistake when preparing the tickets?" Jane suggested sheepishly, already knowing that it was stupid; the odds of someone making the same mistake with two different tickets were so high as to be nearly infinite.

"No, there's got to be something we've missed..." Alan said, staring at the barrier in confusion, as though asking it to reveal its secrets.

"Maybe there's some secret method of getting through you're meant to use or something?" Harry put in. "You know, like Hagrid used to get into Diagon Alley?"

Before anyone else could reply, however, a group of people walked past them, talking animatedly, and Harry and Hermione's ears picked up at the voice's words.

"-packed with muggles, of course-"

Spinning around eagerly, Harry and Hermione, along with Alan and Jane, were relieved to see a group of redheads; a plump woman who had to be the mother, four boys of varying ages (Two of them were apparently twins), and a small girl who was holding her mother's hand, standing in the middle of the platform as they looked around.

"Now, what's the platform number again?" the woman asked, glancing around herself.

"Nine and three quarters!" the girl piped up, looking eagerly at her family. "Mum, can't I go?"

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet," the mother said, before turning to her oldest son. "All right Percy, you go first."

The oldest boy nodded, picked up his trunk, and walked towards the barriers between platforms nine and ten, but before any of the Grangers could see what he did, a bunch of tourists walked in between them and the boy, and when they had gone by he had vanished.

Glancing down at his children, Alan smiled slightly at them as he indicated the woman.

"Well, shall we?" he asked casually.

Jane nodded. "We might as well; we're never going to get in at this rate," she said, as she walked over to the woman just as she was talking to one of her twin sons.

"...honestly, woman, call yourself our mother?" the boy was saying at the moment. "Can't you tell *I'm* George?"

"Um, excuse me," Alan said, taking advantage of the brief pause in conversation to attract the mother's attention. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was just wondering..."

"Yes?" the woman said, turning back to smile at the others as she waved her twins away with her left hand, the right still holding her daughter's arm. "Your children's first time at Hogwarts? Ron's new too," she explained, indicating her one remaining son, a tall, thin, gangling individual with big hands, feet, and a long nose.

"Yes, that's right," Alan said, smiling in relief. "It's just that, well, we're... 'muggles', I believe the term is?... and as a result, we have no idea..."

"How to get onto the platform?" the woman said, smiling reassuringly at the two children. "Not to worry; all you need to do is run towards the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop, and don't be scared you'll crash in to it; that's most important. Go on, you two go now, before Ron."

"Good luck," the girl said, giving Harry a small smile, which he gratefully returned.

"Thanks," he said casually, even as a rarely used part of his mind- so rarely used even *he* often wasn't aware when it was working- registered the fact that the girl was very pretty. Turning to look back at the barrier, the thoughts of his subconscious filed away for the moment, Harry and Hermione took their trunks with one hand, reached over with the other hand to give their sibling a comforting squeeze, and then ran towards the barrier, already instinctively closing their eyes in anticipation of the crash that was coming...

And then, to their surprise, they realised that they were still running. Opening their eyes, Harry and Hermione stared in awe at the hundreds of people gathered around the platform in front of them, filled with numerous adults saying goodbye to children, from their age to around seventeen years old, as they piled onto a long red steam engine. Glancing back, Harry and Hermione saw a large iron wrought gate where they had just walked through, with the words *Platform Nine and Three Quarters* on it. They were through.

"Incredible..." a voice said from behind them. Glancing back, Harry and Hermione were pleased to see their parents standing there; evidently, the woman had let them go ahead before coming through with her son and daughter.

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" Hermione said, grinning at her mother before she indicated the trunk she was dragging along behind her. "Come on, let's get these things onto the train; I'd like to know we can find a good seat."

"Sounds sensible," Alan said, as he took one end of Harry's trunk while Jane carried Hermione's. Walking along the platform, Hermione briefly heard someone complain about a missing toad, while Harry thought he saw a boy with dreadlocks show his friends a box

containing some kind of tarantula, but otherwise the trip to find a good carriage was uneventful.

Eventually reaching one of the last carriages on the train, Alan stopped, glanced at the windows, and smiled.

"This should do," he said, looking back at Harry and Hermione. "Empty enough to allow you to sit by yourselves if you want, but with enough people nearby to let you talk to them if you want."

Harry and Hermione smiled gratefully. They didn't have much trouble making friends, of course, but they still preferred to do it at their own pace; Harry in particular sometimes found it hard to trust people.

With their parents' help, Harry and Hermione quickly had their trunks loaded onto the carriage without any event, and then, all too soon, it was time to say goodbye; Alan and Jane would have stayed until the train had left, but they had a few appointments back at the surgery, and were already running late.

"So... this is it until Christmas, then?" Alan said as he looked at his children. "You *will* remember to write, of course?"

"Of *course* we will, Dad," Harry said, smiling reassuringly at his father. "Don't worry; we'll let you know how things are going, OK?"

"And we'll be sure to let you know if we learn anything particularly interesting about the wizarding world," Hermione added. "You know, the power structure, how long the school's been in existence, that sort of thing..."

"Hermione," Jane said, smiling reassuringly at her daughter, "you don't have to tell us *everything* you find out about your new lives; just give us a few details that we might be interested in, and your father and I will be perfectly satisfied."

Hermione looked slightly disappointed, and Harry chuckled slightly; she'd evidently been looking forward to having an excuse to practice her writing with a quill.

"Well, see you at Christmas!" he said, as he and Hermione hugged Alan and Jane one last time each, before their parents turned, walked back to the entrance of Platform Nine and Three Quarters, and vanished back into the muggle world.

After a moment or two staring after their vanished parents, Harry and Hermione grabbed their trunks, Harry taking Hedwig's cage for himself, but just as they were about to turn around to look for a seat, Harry bumped into one of the twins that they had seen on the muggle King's Cross, while Hermione collided with his brother; the twins in question had been so caught-up in talking about something that they hadn't noticed the two younger children.

"Oh, sorry 'bout that," one of them said, helping Hermione to her feet as his brother helped Harry up. "Weren't looking where we were going."

"That's us all over; we just don't look ahead that much," the other said casually.

Hermione smiled reassuringly at them.

"It's all right," she assured them, as she indicated herself and Harry. "I'm Hermione Granger, by the way; this is my brother Harry."

"I'm Fred; this is George," one of the twins said, indicating his brother.

"Muggle-born?" George asked, looking at them curiously.

"Well, she is, but I'm adopted," Harry explained. "My parents died when I was one, but I was moved to an orphanage after my uncle nearly killed me when I was six."

"*Ouch*," Fred said, wincing sympathetically as he looked at Harry. "Sorry to hear that."

"Wait a minute..." George said, suddenly looking at Harry with an expression on his face that resembled someone having been hit by a sudden inspiration. "Uh... sorry to sound hasty, but... your original surname wouldn't happen to be *Potter*, would it?"

Harry and Hermione glanced over at each other for a moment, before Harry shrugged.

"Well, they'd probably have found out when we got there anyway," he said, before turning back to look at Fred and George with a small smile. "Yeah, I'm Harry Potter, but I'd appreciate you not making too much of a fuss about it; I'd rather *not* have the whole train knowing I'm here all at once."

One of the twins- Fred- opened his mouth to speak, and Hermione took over.

"Please?" she asked, looking at him in that imploring puppy-dog look that she often used on their parents at home when Harry or her accidentally broke something. "You can tell your family if you want, but we would *really* appreciate it if you didn't start yelling about it; my brother is *not* interested in having the entire train coming to his apartment to gawk at his forehead."

"Uh... sure," Fred said, nodding at the young girl.

"Thanks," Hermione said, smiling brightly at the twins before grabbing her brother's hand and leading him into a nearby empty compartment. Settling down on opposite sides of the compartment, allowing them both to enjoy a full view out the window, Harry smiled as he and his sister studied the sight before them, Hedwig currently asleep in her cage after her long night away before the departure for King's Cross.

Glancing out of the window, Harry noticed the family of redheads talking animatedly, and his eyes once again fell on the little girl. He couldn't understand why, but there was something about her that seemed... interesting, he guessed was the best word for it. He couldn't place *what* it was about her that he found that way, though...

Well, she is rather pretty, a voice said in his head, but Harry shoved that thought aside; he must have been watching too many of Hermione's romance movies recently. She may have preferred books to other forms of communication on the whole, but Harry had grown rather fond of some television shows at the orphanage, and Hermione had eventually started to watch them with him. To her surprise, she'd grown to enjoy them, even going so far as to start to

rent a few Disney movies to watch with her mother, which Harry had occasionally been roped into watching with the two of them while Alan was away on business. Although he would have denied it under oath, he'd actually grown rather fond of a few of them, such as 'Beauty and the Beast'...

But thinking a girl was *pretty*? He'd never done *that* in his life...

"Harry!" Hermione hissed, shoving her brother lightly on the shoulder and breaking him out of whatever daze he'd suddenly fallen into, jerking her thumb at the redheads as she spoke. "They just mentioned your name!"

Instantly Harry seemed more focused, leaning slightly closer to the glass as the red-haired family continued to talk, the girl speaking up for the first time.

"Oh, Mum," she said, suddenly sounding desperate, "can I go on the train and see him, Mum, oh please-"

"You've already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn't something you goggle at in a zoo," the mother said scoldingly at the daughter. More was said, but Hermione was distracted by the brief expression that had flicked across her brother's face before it assumed its normal expression of idle curiosity.

Did he look... disappointed Hermione asked herself, as she looked at Harry in confusion. *But he was complaining about getting attention earlier...*

Then she shrugged and decided to put it aside. After all, it was hardly important why her brother reacted a certain way to a girl when they were about to start at a school of *witchcraft* and *wizardry*...

Although it does open up possibilities... Hermione thought jokingly to herself, as the train whistled once and everyone left outside began to pile onto it. Hermione vaguely caught an argument between the twins and their mother- something about a toilet seat- and then the train was running down the tracks, the mother waving after the train and the sister half laughing, half crying, running to keep up, until the train

was going too fast and she simply stopped and waved until she could no longer be seen.

As Harry and Hermione settled down back into their compartment, there was a brief knock on the door, and the youngest male redhead came into the compartment.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, indicating the seat beside Hermione. "Everywhere else is full."

"No, go ahead," Harry said, looking briefly at his sister, who just nodded at him in confirmation.

"Thanks," the boy said, sitting down as he looked at them. "Oh, I'm Ron by the way; Ron Weasley."

"I'm Hermione Granger, and this is my brother Harry," Hermione said, holding out her own hand to shake Ron's, followed by Harry doing the same, although he noticed that Ron's eyes flicked to his forehead briefly, as though looking for the scar on his forehead.

"So, your brothers mentioned meeting me, I take it?" Harry asked, looking inquiringly at Ron.

"Uh... yeah," Ron said, nodding in response to Harry's question; he almost seemed to be functioning on automatic. "You... you really got adopted? We always thought you went off to live with your relatives..."

"Who nearly murdered him for being himself, thus proving they were unfit for raising a child and resulting in them going to prison while my brother went to the orphanage," Hermione put in, looking at Ron with a mixture of surprise and disappointment. "That was never mentioned anywhere? I would have thought the wizarding world would want to keep up with information about the boy who saved it."

"*Hermione...*" Harry muttered through gritted teeth, before his sister turned to look at him and flashed him a quick grin to assure him that she was joking.

“Eh?” Ron said, looking between the two of them in confusion. “What was that about?”

“Oh, just Hermione being herself; she’s always teasing me about my newfound ‘celebrity status’,” Harry explained, rolling his eyes good-naturedly as he looked at his sister in exasperation. “Can’t you come up with something new; you’ve been at it for the last *month!*”

“And I’ll keep doing it until / get tired of it, thank you very much,” Hermione retorted, smiling pleasantly at Harry before turning back to look at Ron. “And on that topic, why was your sister so keen to get on the train to see Harry again?”

“Ah,” Ron said, looking at Harry apologetically. “Well, y’see, she was always rather keen on hearing the story of how you... y’know... defeated You-Know-Who when you were only a baby... Kept on asking for mum and dad to tell it to her when we were growing up...”

Harry was about to say something else- although he wasn’t sure *what* he’d say- when Hermione broke into the conversation, sensing her brother’s sudden discomfort at the direction this discussion was taking; as much as she enjoyed teasing him, she knew when she was in danger of going too far.

“*Anyway,*” she said, looking over at Harry apologetically before turning back to Ron, “enough about *my* brother; what are *your* brothers like?”

Chapter 8 – Confrontations and The Sorting Hat

With the initial awkwardness of the compartment having gone, Harry, Hermione and Ron spent a very pleasant few hours idly chatting about nothing in particular as the train sped along towards Hogwarts. Ron told them a bit about his family, which proved rather interesting; his older brother Bill worked as a curse-breaker for Gringotts, the second-oldest brother, Charlie, worked with dragons in Romania, while his father was employed in the Ministry of Magic, working in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office (Harry and Hermione both made a mental note to see about talking to Ron's father at some point; it might be interesting to see how the wizarding world regarded the world they'd grown up in).

There were only a few real disruptions to their routine over the course of the trip. The first instance was when the food trolley arrived; Ron tried to protest against Harry and Hermione buying him some sweets as well, but they had managed to convince him that he really didn't mind, and, eventually, he'd reluctantly agreed. Harry had quickly found himself eating away at the chocolate frogs, while Hermione, for some reason, gravitated to the Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans. Harry and Hermione found the Famous Witches and Wizards cards particularly amazing; the cards on Dumbledore and Merlin were especially interesting to the two of them, and Hermione made another mental note to do some research into who Grindlewald was.

Harry and Hermione had just convinced Ron to play a brief guessing game with them involving the Beans- who could guess correctly what flavour something was without eating it- when the compartment door opened and three boys entered.

Looking at them, Harry and Hermione were surprised to recognise the boy in the middle as the boy who they'd 'spoken' to while purchasing their robes in Madam Malkin's. The two boys on either side of him strongly reminded Harry of shaved gorillas, although, given the way they were standing on either side of the third boy, he supposed 'bodyguards' would be the more accurate term.

"Is it true?" the boy said, looking instantly at Harry as though Ron and Hermione were almost beneath his notice. "They're saying all over the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, isn't it?"

"Yes?" Harry said, looking at the boy with an expression that he hoped made it clear that he couldn't care less about who he was or how he'd become famous.

Evidently, the boy didn't care; he actually seemed to think that Harry was looking at the people over his shoulder, when Harry really couldn't have cared less who they were.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," the boy said carelessly, indicating the two boys respectively. "And my name's Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough that might have been hiding a snigger, and Hermione had to cover her mouth with her hand before anything more than a small gasp of air could escape her, and Malfoy looked at them both.

"Think my name's funny, do you?" he said, as he looked at Ron. "No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

He glanced over at Hermione curiously. "I don't know who you are; who were your parents?"

"You wouldn't know them," Hermione said, looking back at him harshly. "They don't exactly move in what *you* would think of as normal society; they're Muggles."

Malfoy's eyes widened in surprise as he turned back to look at Harry.

"You were raised by *muggles*?" he asked, looking at Harry with an almost pitying expression on his face. "How did you manage to *survive*, living with such poor guardians?"

Harry's eyes narrowed as he stared at Malfoy.

I am really beginning to hate this guy... he thought to himself. Insulting muggles as a whole was bad enough, but if Malfoy started making harsh comments about the people who'd cared for him as though he were their own, Harry was *really* going to lose his temper...

"Very well, *actually*," Harry replied harshly as he stared back at Malfoy.

"Oh, how can you know *that* unless you have some *decent* company to compare it to?" Malfoy asked, apparently not concerned in the slightest about the angry expressions Ron and Hermione were now shooting in his direction. "You really shouldn't go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, and Harry could only hope that his expression made it clear that, in his opinion, the boy may as well have been offering him a piece of dog's mess.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coldly as he looked back at Malfoy; he'd always hated the concept of racists, even though he'd never actually met any back at school, but this guy was even worse than he'd ever imagined they could be.

Malfoy's expression didn't actually change, but his face did develop a slightly pink tinge as his eyes briefly flashed in anger.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "If you don't' act a bit more polite, you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them either-"

"And if *you* know what's good for *you*, you'll get out of this compartment while you're still able to keep your dignity intact," Hermione retorted angrily, as she stood up to look at Malfoy with a harsh gleam in her eyes. "Honestly, you couldn't have cared *less* about my brother in Madam Malkin's, but now you know his name and think that gives you the right to go through a complete U-turn in your attitude? Quite frankly, if you want to make friends with my brother just to hang on to his reputation because you haven't got one yourself, you should just get out of here right now, understand? He's not interested in his 'celebrity status', he couldn't care less about

attention, and after the way you talked to us, you'd have better luck trying to move the planet to Jupiter; are we clear?"

Malfoy looked at Hermione in barely-contained rage.

"You've made yourself an enemy today, mudblood," he said harshly.

"You shut your mouth!" Ron yelled as he stood up and glared at Malfoy, joined quickly by Harry and Hermione; neither of them could be certain what this... *berk* had just called her, but they'd rather sort him out now than wait for him to come back later. Harry and Hermione were already going over a few of their favourite martial arts movies in their heads to try and figure out how to stop these idiots without resorting to magic (They'd rather not use magic for the first time in a fight) but, before anything could happen, footsteps came down the corridor and, suddenly, the oldest of Ron's three brothers (Percy, Harry and Hermione vaguely recalled) was standing at the door, looking at the six of them inquiringly.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"No... they were just leaving," Harry said, stopping himself from saying they were about to attempt to knock some sense into these idiots; that wouldn't do him any good right now, especially given what Ron had told him and Hermione about Percy's obsession with keeping rules.

Glaring briefly at the three of them, Malfoy and his two cronies walked out of the compartment, apparently not even prepared to risk making an insulting gesture to the other three with Percy watching them like a hawk. The prefect glared after them for a few moments, and then sighed and walked out of the compartment, shutting the door behind him.

"You've met him before?" Ron asked, looking curiously at Harry and Hermione.

"Yes, we encountered him while purchasing our robes in Madam Malkins'," Hermione replied, rolling her eyes in exasperation as she looked out the nearby window. "He hasn't much since then, really; he

was an annoying, arrogant idiot then, and he's an annoying, arrogant jerk now."

"I've heard of his family," Ron said, a dark expression clouding his face. "They were some of the first people to come back onto our side after You-Know-Who disappeared; said they'd been bewitched. Dad doesn't believe it; says Mr Malfoy wouldn't need an excuse to go over to the dark side."

Harry and Hermione just nodded ruefully at that, but already their feelings about Malfoy were degenerating into loathing. Not only was he an arrogant jerk, his father had been an evil wizard who tried to escape punishment by pretending he'd been under somebody else's control? As far as they were concerned, if a man wasn't prepared to accept the consequences for making a mistake, he shouldn't even get involved in the first place...

Glancing at her watch, Hermione sighed.

"We'd better get changed; I expect we'll be arriving soon," she said, standing up and grabbing her bag as she glanced over at Harry. "I'll just find a toilet and change there, OK? I'll join you in a minute or two."

"Right," Harry said, as he and Ron opened their trunks and pulled out their own uniforms, Hermione walking out of the compartment and heading down towards the end of the carriage.

Several minutes later, after a boat trip across the lake which allowed them a truly incredible view of the large castle that would be their home for most of the next few years, Harry and Hermione were standing in a large stone room outside the school's Great Hall, looking around at the other first-years as they tried to distract themselves from what they might have to do in a few moments. After arrival, they'd been taken up to a large door (Guided by Hagrid, much to Harry and Hermione's relief; the rest of the first years had briefly looked at the two of them in awe after they realised that two of their number *knew* the giant who'd met them), where a woman called Professor McGonagall had greeted them, spoken briefly about the

four houses, and then left them to smarten themselves up for the Sorting Ceremony.

It was at moments like these that Harry realised just how different he was to his sister in some ways, even if they had so much in common normally. Hermione was rapidly running through all the spells she'd learned and was wondering which one she was going to need, while Harry was just trying to stay calm and figure out a way to deal with whatever might be involved in this 'ceremony'.

He noticed, much to his annoyance, that Malfoy seemed to be perfectly casual, but given what Ron had told them on the train he'd been expecting that Malfoy's family would want to give him an unfair advantage over the rest of the students. In any case, he seemed to be the only one even slightly relaxed; Ron was nervously rubbing at the dirt that had been on his nose throughout the trip as though trying to stop himself worrying too much, while a boy called Neville (Who Harry vaguely remembered had been looking for his toad earlier on the train) looked like he was going to have a panic attack at any moment.

Fortunately, the feared attack never took place; after a few moments of waiting, the doors opened and they finally entered the Great Hall. The four long tables were an incredible sight, of course, but it was the roof of the hall that really attracted the attention of the first years. Even after reading about it in *Hogwarts: A History*, Harry was awed and amazed at the vast ceiling above him, alit with stars and clouds. A part of him wondered if it would rain in here if it rained outside, but then Professor McGonagall came up to the front of the room, carrying a stool with an old and tattered pointy hat on it.

A small part of Harry recalled that his Aunt Petunia would have screamed at the thought of something so disgusting in Privet Drive, but the rest of him ignored it as Professor McGonagall set the stool down in front of the first years and then turned back to a long table at the end of the hall; presumably the staff table, Harry thought to himself, making a note to take a better look at the other teachers once he was sorted. He was just about to turn to Hermione and ask her what she thought they were meant to do with the newly arrived hat, when a large rip at the bottom of the hat opened up like a mouth

and, much to the astonishment of much of the first years, it actually began to *sing*.

“Oh, you may not think I’m pretty,
But don’t judge on what you see,
I’ll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.
You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.
There’s nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can’t see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.
You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you’ve a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You’ll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don’t be afraid!
And don’t get in a flap!
You’re in safe hands (though I have none)
For I’m a Thinking Cap!”

Harry and Hermione’s eyes widened as they turned to look at each other.

“You mean... that’s *it*?” Hermione hissed at Harry, barely able to contain her annoyance. “We get all worked up out here, and all we have to do is try on a *hat*?”

Harry had to admit, he wasn’t exactly happy about nobody mentioning the hat himself. Still, it sounded like he and Hermione had been given a lot less to worry about than some people; Ron was fuming about his brother Fred claiming that they would have to wrestle a troll, and there were various other looks of indignation on other people’s faces. Despite this, Professor McGonagall didn’t seem to notice; she just pulled out a roll of parchment and looked sharply at the first years.

“When I call out your name, you will sit upon the stool and put on the Sorting Hat so that you may be sorted into your future house,” she explained, before turning back to the sheet. “Abbott, Hannah!”

The process didn’t seem to take long, Harry noted with relief; the girl who had been called simply walked up to the stool, put the hat on her head (It came down over her nose Harry noted with a slight smile before remembering it would probably be that big on him as well) and sat there for a few seconds before the Hat cried out, “HUFFLEPUFF!”, and the girl ran off to the table on the right amid a torrent of clapping.

The rest of the Sortings passed in much the same manner, until, finally, it was Hermione’s turn; as Harry had asked, he had kept his original surname after the adoption, although some of his teachers marked him down as ‘Potter-Granger’ as an acknowledgement to his guardians.

As Hermione sat on the stool, the sorting hat slid down over her eyes, and, much to her surprise, she heard a voice speaking in her ear.

“Interesting...” the voice said, sounding like it was the hat that was talking to her. “You have an ambition to prove yourself, yes, but you are certainly *not* interested in power... You’re hardworking and intelligent, true, but you take time to become truly *loyal* to someone, and your intellect, while a dominant part of your personality, is equalled by your courage... So where shall you go? Ravenclaw or Gryffindor... Ravenclaw or Gryffindor...”

Then the hat shouted out to the hall, “GRYFFINDOR!” and Hermione smiled as she took the hat off and walked to the middle table. She briefly contemplated sitting beside Percy Weasley, at one of the few remaining empty seats, but decided against it; his strict attitude towards adhering to the rules failed to win him any points with her. In the end, she sat down at an empty corner of the table, opposite Percy but closer to Fred and George; they may be mischief-makers, according to Ron, but at least they seemed like they’d be more lively company.

Turning back to the Sorting, she watched, only half paying attention, as various other people were sorted into houses (A boy called Neville Longbottom took a remarkably long time to get sorted into Gryffindor, while Malfoy, she was relieved to note, got his wish and went into Slytherin; if she had to put up with *him* on a long-term basis, she’d probably have asked to be sorted into Ravenclaw instead)...

And, after a prolonged wait, it was finally the moment she’d been waiting for.

“Potter-Granger, Harry!”

As Harry walked up to the stool where the hat sat, waiting for him, he was privately relieved that McGonagall had chosen to include his ‘unofficial’ surname as well; he was still attracting a lot of attention, but mainly people just seemed confused about why he had ‘Granger’ on the end of his name.

“Potter, did she say?”

“What’s with the *Granger*?”

“You’re nearest; does he have the scar?”

Reaching the stool, Harry sat down, the hat was dropped on his head, and he found himself with a voice in his ear.

“Mmm...” the voice said thoughtfully. “Difficult. Very difficult. There’s a great deal of talent, oh my goodness yes, and a nice thirst to prove yourself... courage is plentiful here, Mr Potter, and you’re certainly

intelligent and loyal... but ambition? Short on the mark here; you seem happy just to do something you enjoy, without worrying about whether or not it shall make you truly *powerful* in the end... You're loyal, yes, but, like your sister, it takes you time to develop the kind of loyalty that would make Hufflepuff ideal... and while you're intelligent, your brain is far surpassed by your courage... Yes, the perfect choice for you is unquestionably... GRYFFINDOR!"

As cheers went up throughout the Great Hall, Harry smiled, removed the hat, and walked over to the table to sit beside Hermione; if nothing else came of him being in Gryffindor, he was still in classes with his sister.

The rest of the ceremony was relatively quiet; Ron, neither Harry or Hermione were surprised to see, was sorted into Gryffindor, and then there was only one boy left (Blaise Zabini, who went into Slytherin), before a tall, elderly man with a long white beard stood up at the table, instantly recognisable as Albus Dumbledore from the cards Harry and Hermione had acquired on the train.

"Welcome!" the man said, looking around the room. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! Before we begin, I would just like to say a few words; Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you; now tuck in!"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other incredulously for a moment, but then their attention was drawn to the food that had suddenly appeared on the table and they decided to focus more on that. As they piled food onto their plates, Harry glanced over at the staff table, and was surprised to see a tall man with greasy black hair glaring at him in an unnerving manner; Harry turned away from the gaze as fast as he could.

"Who's that?" he asked Fred (Although it could have been George), nudging him with an elbow and indicating the man in question.

"Oh, that's Snape; head of Slytherin house," Fred explained, looking apologetically down at Harry. "Sorry mate; seems to have decided he doesn't like you that much. You'll have a rough time in Potions."

Harry chuckled slightly at the thought of having trouble in his Potions class (After Hermione's constant quizzes, he'd be challenged to find

something he *couldn't* do at the moment there) but he shook his head and turned his attention back to Fred.

“He teaches Potions?”

“Yeah, but it’s well known he’d like the Defence Against the Dark Arts job,” Fred explained, shrugging as he turned back to his food. “Anyway, hope you’ve got a while before you have to deal with him; he’s stupidly unfair to everyone if they’re not in Slytherin.”

Recalling the look on the Potions Master’s face, Harry had to admit, he hoped he *did* have a long time before Potions...

Chapter 9 – The Potions Master

The next week or so of school were a mixture of the sometimes mundane and sometimes interesting. In general, Harry and Hermione found, much to their surprise, that it was even a challenge trying to find their way around the place to get to their classes, rather than the relatively straightforward affair they'd expected. The castle itself was fairly easy to get your head around after a certain amount of time, but the stairs had an annoying habit of moving around whenever you wanted to get anywhere, and the fact that the people in various portraits seemed to wander off and visit other portraits whenever they wanted made it hard to find distinctive landmarks that could be used to navigate around the place.

The lessons, however, were always enjoyable, although the degree of challenge they faced during their lessons varied. Thanks to Harry and Hermione's early reading at home, they were managing to cope better than some of their fellow students at various tasks, although they still had their weaknesses in a few areas. Astronomy, for example, was never going to be something either of them particularly engaged with; Harry couldn't particularly see the relevance to most of their other subjects, and while Hermione found any aspect of wizarding life fascinating, after learning about what had happened to her brother's parents, she was more interested in learning something a bit more practical than studying the stars.

For the same reason, the two of them sometimes found it hard to engage in their Herbology lessons. It was interesting work, no doubt about it, but some parts of it, such as the lessons that simply focused on trimming various plants, could get a bit repetitive after a time. The two of them knew that the lessons would probably become more relevant once they had potions for the first time, and thus had a better idea of what the various ingredients should be used for, but until then neither of them could engage with the subject on many levels; none of the plants were even especially dangerous, so the potential risk factor was limited.

As far as History of Magic went, the less said about the subject, the better, as far as Harry and Hermione were concerned. Hermione

generally managed to stay awake long enough to make notes on the topics that may come up in exams, but Harry generally only managed to stay awake long enough to absorb the first few minutes of each lesson before his brain fell into a daze and he felt more like dozing than working. He genuinely tried to stay awake, but he wasn't quite as much of a sponge for information as Hermione was, and, as far as he was concerned, there was only so many times you could hear about goblin rebellions before it became dull...

By contrast, however, Charms and Transfiguration were proving highly enjoyable for both of them. Charms in particular had proven to be particularly intriguing, with Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, managing to make the subject highly entertaining while at the same time still getting across what he was attempting to teach them. The only downside in the class so far had been the first lesson; when he'd been reading the register and came to Harry's name, he gave an excited squeak and subsequently toppled off the back of his chair. Hermione had teased Harry about it in the common room that night, but she'd subsequently left it alone; if nothing else, she wasn't exactly eager to have anyone overhear her technically making fun of a teacher, even if she was focusing more on teasing her brother in the process.

Transfiguration, on the other hand, was a more serious subject, but it still proved enjoyable, even if they would take some time to get on to the more interesting aspects of the course. So far, their lessons had consisted of such small Transfigurations as turning matches into needles, but despite the apparent simplicity of the task, it actually proved surprisingly difficult. Even after almost a whole lesson of trying the first time around, Harry and Hermione's best efforts had only resulted in one or two transfigured matches, although it was better than some of their classmates had managed; Dean Thomas, one of Harry's dorm-mates, had only managed to give the match a silvery colour while leaving it with the other details such as it being made of wood.

Defence Against the Dark Arts, unfortunately, wasn't as interesting as the name would suggest. Quirrell had the potential to be an interesting teacher, but his constant stutter often made it hard for anyone to understand what he was talking about; it was one of the

few occasions where Harry and Hermione had to *agree* with Malfoy on anything. Of course, the two of them firmly disagreed with Malfoy's claims that the school should replace Quirrell on the grounds of incompetence at his job; he knew what he was *doing*, at least. The teacher may have found it hard at times to get his point across, but Quirrell still seemed to be a pleasant enough character, although his obsession with garlic seemed to be more than slightly over-the-top at times.

Friends, however, were still proving a matter of difficulty for both Harry and Hermione. Hermione was finding it hard to find any girls in her dorm with whom she could have a decent conversation, and although the boys in Harry's dorm were at least easier to talk to, he'd never managed to really hit it off with any of them. Dean, Neville and Seamus seemed to be slightly unnerved by Harry, as though a part of them just couldn't believe that he was being treated like any normal student, while Ron, although more willing to talk to Harry than the others, still seemed a little uncertain about the young wizard.

Still, Harry and Hermione didn't mind too much; so far, they were just grateful to have avoided too many confrontations with Malfoy, the self-proclaimed 'Prince of Slytherin', so far. He'd tried to accidentally-on-purpose run into them on some occasions outside of classes, and insulted muggle-borns and muggles in an even louder voice whenever the two of them were near him, such as at dinner in the Great Hall, but Harry and Hermione generally just ignored him; they had no idea *why* he wanted to provoke a confrontation, but they weren't going to give him the excuse no matter how hard he tried.

As the sun rose on Friday morning, Harry and Hermione found themselves sitting in the Great Hall eating their breakfast, both secretly proud of themselves for having *finally* managed to get down for breakfast without getting diverted by a moving staircase or missing landmark such as a painting or statue.

"So, double Potions now, huh?" Harry said, glancing over at his sister; she practically had the timetable *memorised* by now...

“Yes, that’s right; with the Slytherins, first thing in the morning,” Hermione replied, sighing as she chewed on a piece of toast. “This should be... well, *interesting*, anyway.”

“So long as Snape isn’t *quite* as bad as he’s seemed to be so far...” Harry said, half to himself, as he glanced up at the table at the Potions master, only to once again turn his head away from the table as the teacher in question looked towards him; something about that guy just unnerved Harry, although even he couldn’t be precisely sure *why* that happened all the time.

It was at about that point that the owl post came, flying in from a hole in the wall at the back of the hall to deliver various letters. To date, Harry and Hermione hadn’t received that much- they’d been waiting until the first week was up to send anything to their parents- so it was quite a surprise when Hedwig flew down towards them with a letter clutched in her talons, albeit a rather tatty letter. Opening it, Harry and Hermione found themselves looking at a piece of paper covered in a rather large, untidy scrawl, which said;

Dear Harry and Hermione,

I know you get afternoons off, so would you like to come down to my hut after lunch? I’d like to know how your first week went

Hagrid

Harry and Hermione instantly agreed, Harry quickly grabbing a quill and a piece of parchment to scrawl *Yes please, see you later* and give it to Hedwig before they had to stop eating and head off to Potions.

Once they were down in the dungeon, however, Harry quickly realised that his original assessment had been wrong. Snape didn’t dislike Harry- he *loathed* him.

As Snape entered the classroom, Harry was left distinctly reminded of a large, greasy-haired bat, although whether this was because of his expression of just because of the way his cloak flapped in the air behind him he couldn’t exactly say. Like Flitwick, Snape began the

lesson by taking the register, and, like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah yes," he said, a grim expression on his face. "Harry Potter. Our new- *celebrity*."

Harry was briefly tempted to point out that he was just *famous*- 'celebrity' implied that he *wanted* to attract attention, when really he was perfectly happy just being himself- but he stopped himself in time; it wouldn't do him any good to start insulting the teacher, especially when the teacher in question didn't seem to like him that much anyway.

"There will be no foolish wand-waving in my class," he said, looking around at the students sitting before him with an expression of cold contempt, as though he had already decided that he was wasting his time here but was going to do his job anyway. "As a result, I doubt most of you will understand the subtle nuances of potion-making. However, a few- a very few- of you may indeed prove to have some talent. I can teach you how to brew fame, bottle glory, and even put a stopper on death- if you aren't such a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

As Snape glared around the classroom, Harry swallowed slightly, as Hermione itched to start answering questions and prove that she was *not* a dunderhead.

"Potter!" Snape roared, glaring at Harry. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"Uh... Draught of Living Death?" Harry answered uncertainly; Potions had really been more of Hermione's strong points during their practice sessions at home, but he still liked to think he knew what he was talking about.

"Where would I find a beozar?" Snape continued, not even bothering to confirm whether or not Harry had actually answered the question correctly.

"Uh... that's a stone that'll save you from poisoning, right?" Harry asked. Taking Snape's silence as him being stunned at Harry getting

that detail right, Harry continued. "Just, if I remember right, that's in the stomach of... a goat, correct?"

Snape was by now staring angrily in Harry's direction, as though he couldn't believe that a 'mere' *Gryffindor* could be this good at *his* subject.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?" he said, his temper evidently getting close to breaking point as he leaned forward slightly, clasping his desk with both hands.

That does it; I really don't like this guy... Harry thought to himself, as he glared back at the Potions master, ignoring the sudden slight headache in his scar.

"Aren't they the same thing?" Harry asked, looking at Snape in mock surprise. "Oh, and my mum uses it sometimes in her cooking, although I think muggles call it aconite."

Snape glared in frustration at Harry for a few moments, during which time Harry felt his headache get worse and worse. For some reason, he found himself reminded of all the times he and Hermione had lied to Alan and Jane about what they'd done that day at school, omitting some of their more unusual incidents that Harry now knew to be the result of accidental magic, constantly trying to maintain the 'blank face' that made it appear as though they didn't know what their parents were talking about...

"Ten points from Gryffindor!" Snape roared.

"*WHAT?*" Hermione said, standing up and glaring back at Snape. "But he answered everything correctly!"

"Another ten points for speaking back!" Snape roared, glaring at Hermione. She was about to stand up and say something else, but Ron, who was sitting next to her, put a hand on her shoulder and held her down.

"Don't push it," he whispered to her out of the corner of his mouth. "I hear that Snape can turn very nasty."

Hermione still looked as though she wanted to hex the potions master regardless of what Ron told her, but, taking a few deep breaths, she gradually calmed herself and got back to work.

As the lesson continued, however, it failed to go very well on any level. Harry was partnered with Ron, but his attempts to make conversation with the red-haired boy still failed to go as far as he'd like, Ron always appearing to prefer to focus on the potion rather than keep talking to Harry. Hermione had speculated to Harry that Ron may be feeling as though Harry was only talking to him out of pity, given Harry's own celebrity status and his close sibling relationship (While Ron always felt overshadowed by his brothers) but Harry still persevered, determined to make Ron see that he genuinely wanted to make friends rather than just trying to show sympathy to the poor guy.

Hermione, on the other hand, was faced with her own problem; she had somehow ended up getting paired with Neville Longbottom, generally regarded as one of the poorer students in the class. It was nothing against Neville personally- he had shown a good degree to skill in his Herbology classes, and his problems in Charms and Transfiguration seemed to be just a lack of confidence- but for some reason, just the *sight* of Professor Snape seemed to have turned the boy into a stuttering wreck that looked more like some kind of humanoid jelly rather than a real person. Twice already Hermione had been only just in time to stop him adding the wrong ingredient to the potion, and they still didn't seem to be coming along as well as they should be capable of.

Of course, Snape's condensing attitude towards everyone who wasn't in Slytherin probably had something to do with Neville's own fear of him. He seemed to spend half the lesson criticising the Gryffindors, even when Harry was *sure* that he and Ron had added the correct amount of gnats' wings to the potion, and the other half inviting everyone to look at such details as the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his slugs.

Personally, Harry thought that the slugs could have done with a few more minutes before Malfoy used them in the potion; a few of them still seemed to be a bit juicy to his mind...

Quite frankly, Harry was just relieved to get out of the dungeon and back up to the Great Hall for lunch; even if the afternoon *hadn't* been free, at least he wouldn't have to put up with Snape any longer.

"What was he *thinking*?" Harry said, looking over at his sister in bemusement. "I mean, taking away twenty points just because we *answered* a few flipping questions *correctly*? What is his *problem*?"

"I don't know..." Hermione said, sighing as she shook her head in bemusement before shrugging and looking back at her brother. "Anyway, shall we head down to Hagrid's now?"

At five to three, the two of them left the castle and headed off down to Hagrid's small stone hut, located on the outskirts of the castle grounds, on the boundary of the nearby Forbidden Forest. As Harry knocked on the door (Hermione being slightly distracted by the large crossbow off to one side) a loud barking was heard from the other side of the door, accompanied by a "Back, Fang, *back*!"

Hagrid's large bushy face peered out of the window, looking at them both with a small smile.

"Hand on," he said, cheerily. "*Back*, Fang!"

After a moment's pause, the door opened, revealing a small stone room with a table, assorted chairs, and a fireplace, Hagrid straining to hold onto a great black boarhound.

"Make yerselves at home," Hagrid said, as he let go of the dog and turned to look at the kettle. The dog bounded over to Hermione and immediately began liking her ears eagerly; like Hagrid, Fang was clearly far less dangerous than he looked.

The rock cakes he offered them almost broke their teeth, but Harry and Hermione just smiled and assured him that they were enjoying the cakes. The tea, if nothing else, helped to make up for somewhat poor condition of the food, even if it was a little hotter than the stuff they had at home. Despite this, they enjoyed the chance to talk to their friend about the lessons; Hermione was already taking the chance to organise her thoughts to prepare a letter for their parents. Hagrid mostly seemed willing to listen to them, but when it came to

Snape's treatment of Harry in Potions class, he simply told Harry not to worry about it; Snape never seemed to like any of the students outside of Slytherin.

"But he seemed to really *hate* me."

"Rubbish!" Hagrid said. "Why should he?"

But neither Harry or Hermione missed that Hagrid didn't seem to meet Harry's eye when he said that.

As Hagrid steered the conversation back to Hogwarts as a whole, Hermione started talking to Hagrid about a few of the other teachers, leaving Harry free to glance around the hut. While Hagrid was distracted, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying underneath the tea cosy, noting to his surprise that it was a cutting from the *Daily Prophet*:

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in of Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown. Gringotts' goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day. "But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said Gringotts' spokesgoblin this afternoon.

Harry's eyes widened slightly in surprise. He vaguely recalled hearing something about a recent theft in Gringotts, but nobody had mentioned the date...

Now that he knew, however, his suspicions were aroused.

That theft had taken place on his birthday.

He briefly thought about mentioning the fact to Hagrid, but decided against it; if the gamekeeper wouldn't satisfy his curiosity about a minor thing like Snape, he probably would be even *more* reluctant to talk about something like a theft of the only wizard bank in existence...

Glancing over the story again, Harry's hovered over the line *emptied the same day*.

It can't be a coincidence... he thought to himself.

Hagrid had 'emptied' (If you could call it that) the mysterious vault seven hundred and thirteen that day, by removing the small grubby brown package and putting it in his pocket. Had *that* been what he was there for?

As the two of them walked back to the castle, Harry was just waiting for the chance to talk to Hermione in private about his recent 'deductions' regarding the package. The odds of figuring out what the secret of the package was with just what they knew at the moment were slim to none, he knew that much, but he still needed to talk about what they'd learned now.

And, as long as they were talking about unusual things they'd discovered today, what did Hagrid know about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

Chapter 10 – Flying Lessons

As the news spread across the school that flying lessons started at the beginning of their second week, Harry couldn't help but feel slightly let down at the arrangements for the lessons. By sheer bad luck, Slytherin and Gryffindor had their lessons together, and Harry was dreading the prospect. He'd spent most of the time since he'd arrived at Hogwarts hearing about various flying stories, ranging from Ron nearly hitting a hang-glider on his brother Charlie's old broom to Malfoy's more elaborate and doubtless false tales of escaping muggles in helicopters, and was more than dreading the idea of providing Malfoy with even *more* potential 'blackmail' material, especially since this stuff would actually be *accurate*...

"Great," Harry groaned, as he and Hermione walked down to the grounds for their first flying lesson. "Just what I always wanted; to make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

"You don't *know* you'll make a fool of yourself!" Hermione said, looking critically at her brother as they rounded a corner and headed down the stairs. "Anyway, I'm sure Malfoy's just putting it on; he reminds of a hot-air balloon when it's on the ground and nobody's bother to deflate it at times."

Harry chuckled slightly at the analogy. He had to admit, it *did* seem like an effective comparison; all that talking Malfoy did, and he *never* seemed to say anything that someone might find useful. If it wasn't insults about Harry and Hermione's parents, he was going on and on about how great his parents were, and all the items they sent to him in the owl post (Although he didn't do this that much since Harry and Hermione started to exchange letters with their parents on a more regular basis, accompanied sometimes by a muggle treat they had found themselves missing in Hogwarts).

Neither of them were entirely sure why Malfoy was making such a big deal about his home life whenever either of them were around; Harry thought that Malfoy was just trying to 'prove' how better wizards were when compared to muggles, while Hermione just believed that Malfoy was an arrogant idiot.

“Too much hot air, huh?” Harry said, chuckling slightly. “*That’s* an understatement.”

Sighing, he stared ahead at the steps leading to the grounds, where a few Gryffindor and Slytherin first-years were already walking. “Just wish I didn’t have to do this *now*...”

“You’ll be *fine*, Harry,” Hermione assured him, smiling at her brother. “After all, *I’m* the one who always takes the isle seat when we have to fly anywhere, remember? I sometimes feel like it would take an *elephant* to stop you positioning yourself at the window seat on aeroplanes!”

Harry chuckled slightly as he remembered the flights in question. It wasn’t that his sister was a bad flyer, per se, it was simply that a part of her preferred to keep her feet on the ground unless all other options were exhausted. It was part of the reason why she preferred the isle seats on flights; it gave her greater freedom to get up and walk about the plane, thus allowing to feel more like she was still on the ground rather than flying several hundred feet above the ground.

“Yeah, that’s a good point, I guess,” Harry said, as the two of them began to walk down the stairs towards the school grounds. As the various first years emerged from the castle onto the grounds to see the broomsticks laid out before them (Unfortunately, the majority of the Slytherins were already there), the last of Harry’s earlier fear vanished, to be replaced by a more simple anticipation of what would happen. True, Fred and George Weasley had told him that the school brooms had their problems, but since Harry had no previous broomstick experience to compare them to, he wasn’t that concerned about the broom’s performances in the air; he would just be satisfied to get off the ground and start flying.

A moment after the last students filed in from the castle, their flying teacher, Madam Hooch (A tall woman with short grey hair and hawk-like eyes) arrived, glaring slightly at the pupils.

“Well, what are you all waiting for?” she asked, looking around at the pupils. “Everyone stand by a broomstick; come on, hurry up!”

As the students dashed over to the brooms, Harry spared a brief glare in Malfoy's direction as the Slytherin smirked mockingly at him; evidently the git already assumed he could fly rings around Harry and they hadn't even started yet. Admittedly, the broom's raggedy appearance didn't inspire confidence in its aerodynamic abilities, but given that Malfoy's broom would be in a similar state, that didn't strike Harry as being much of a problem, so the Slytherin's confidence really had no basis in reality as far as Harry could see.

Then again, Harry thought to himself, as he positioned himself over a broomstick near the bottom of the line- he didn't want to attract attention to himself unless he had to-, *when did anything that idiot thinks have any bearing on reality?*

"Stick your right hand out over your broom," Madam Hooch said, at the top of the line of students, "and say 'Up'."

"UP!" everyone said.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand instantly, but his was one of the few that did; Hermione's broom leapt up about halfway, and Neville Longbottom's hadn't moved at all. A part of Harry wondered if brooms, like animals, could somehow tell when you were nervous; Neville's tone of voice made it clear that he'd prefer to keep his feet on the ground.

After the initial problems were over and everyone had successfully summoned their brooms to their hands, Madam Hooch went along the line and began to instruct everyone how to mount the brooms. Harry was pleasantly surprised to learn that he got it right on the first try- it was a lot harder than it looked- while Malfoy (Much to Harry and Hermione's amusement) was told that he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground as hard as you can," Madam Hooch said, glaring around at the students. "Keep brooms steady, rise a few feet and then come straight down by leaning forwards slightly. On my whistle- three... two..."

Then everything went wrong; Neville, apparently unwilling to be left on the ground, pushed off the ground before the whistle and touched

Madam Hooch's lips. Before anyone could do anything Neville had already reached a height of twenty feet, resembling a cork shot out of a champagne bottle that had been under a ridiculous amount of pressure, and then, as he looked back and saw just *how* high he was, his face became pale, he lost his grip on the broomstick, and was sent tumbling to the ground. Harry and Hermione, along with a few other students, tried to pull out their wand (Although what charm they would have used was anybody's guess) but it was too late. With a loud thud, accompanied by a sickening crunch, Neville hit the ground, and most of the students ran over to look at him; the Slytherins, naturally, just laughed at his misfortune.

"Broken wrist..." Madam Hooch sighed, as she leant down to examine Neville. "Well, come on boy; I'd better get you to the Hospital Wing..."

She turned to look at the rest of the students. "As for you all, you are not to do anything. If you do not leave those rooms where they are, you will be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch'."

As soon as Neville and Madam Hooch were out of earshot, Neville holding his wrist and fighting back tears, Malfoy burst out laughing.

"Did you see his face, the great lump?" he chuckled, prompting hoots of laughter from the other Slytherins.

"Shut up, Malfoy!" snapped Parvati Patil, an Asian girl with long black hair.

"Oh, sticking up for Longbottom, are you Patil?" teased Millicent Bulstrode, a Slytherin girl who reminded Harry of some kind of female version of his fractured memories of his uncle. "Never thought *you'd* be the kind to go for crybabies!"

"Look," Malfoy said, diving for the ground and scooping something up, "it's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

As Harry and Hermione turned to look at the object in Malfoy's hand, Harry groaned slightly as he recognised it from breakfast this morning. It was a Remembrall, if he recalled correctly; held properly, it glowed red if you'd forgotten something...

"Give it back, Malfoy," Harry said, stepping forward as he glared angrily at the boy who was rapidly becoming his Slytherin 'nemesis'. Everyone stopped talking to watch as the 'Boy Who Lived' stepped forward, his wand clutched in one hand as he glared at the other boy, but Malfoy only smirked.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to collect it. How about up a tree?"

"Give it *here!*" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had already leapt onto his broomstick and was tearing off into the air. A part of Harry noticed (Much to his annoyance) that Malfoy *could* fly really well, but the rest of him was now uncaring about that, and just wanted to catch the berk.

"Harry..." Hermione hissed at her brother as he reached down and grabbed his broom, "don't do anything rash... you don't know what to do on a broom..."

But Harry didn't even hear his sister; slinging one leg over the broom, he kicked hard against the ground and tore up after Malfoy, leaving the other students staring after him, air whipping through his hair as his robes billowed out around him, and, in a flash, Harry realised that this was something he didn't even *need* to be taught; he could do it almost instinctively, as though he'd been here before and had only needed to get back on the broom to remember it. He heard screams and gasps from behind him, accompanied by an admiring whoop from a few of the other students, but he couldn't waste time to look back and find out who it was; he had other things to worry about right now.

As the initial euphoria of flight faded, Harry pulled his broomstick to a stop opposite Malfoy, who was hovering in the air and staring at Harry with an expression of mingled shock and confusion; probably surprised that a 'mudblood-raised half-blood' could be better than *him* at anything...

"Care to hand that over?" Harry asked, glaring at his opponent with a small smile on his face as he jerked his head towards the remembrall in Malfoy's left hand. "No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, remember?"

“Oh, yeah?” Malfoy said, trying to sneer at his opponent, but failing miserably at his attempts to sound convincingly threatening. If Harry hadn’t been so focused on getting the remembrall back, he would have chuckled slightly at the proof of a pet theory of his; without his hired gorillas, Malfoy lacked the nerve to be *really* arrogant...

“Catch it if you can, then!” the Slytherin yelled at Harry, as he threw the glass ball high into the air and then dived sharply towards the ground. Harry didn’t even stop to think; as he watched the ball fall, apparently in slow motion, he lowered his broom handle and dived after it, gathering speed as he approached the ball, wind whistling in his ears mixed with the screams of the students still watching in the courtyards...

The ball was getting closer...

He stretched out one hand...

Then, with barely a metre to go before the ball hit the ground and shattered, he grabbed it in his right hand, pulling the broom up straight as he reached the ground, and then rolled off the stick, the remembrall clasped in one hand, as the rest of the students towards him, yelling stunned approval as Harry staggered to his feet. As soon as he was standing up, a bushy-haired figure had grabbed him around the neck and was hugging him hard, sobbing slightly into his shoulder as it yelled at him.

“IF YOU EVER DO SOMETHING THAT *STUPID* AGAIN, HARRY POTTER!” Hermione yelled into her brother’s ear, shaking slightly from fear at what she had just witnessed, “I’LL-”

“HARRY POTTER!” another voice called out from off to one side, and Harry’s heart sank faster than the rate at which he’d just dived; Professor McGonagall was running towards them.

“*Never-* in all my time at Hogwarts-”

She was almost speechless with shock as she grabbed Harry’s arm and began to walk back towards the stairs. Harry briefly saw Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle’s triumphant expressions from off to one side, but

before they had even reached the stairs, the two of them found Hermione baring their way.

"If you want to expel my brother, you'll have to expel me too!" she said, glaring up at the teacher. "I didn't come this far just to lose the first person who actually bothered to talk to me!"

"Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall said, looking at Hermione in surprise. "Your devotion to your brother is laudable, but unnecessary; I assure you, I have no *intention* of expelling your brother."

"*WHAT?*" Malfoy cried out from behind them, but the only thing that could be heard after that was a mumbling sound; a quick glance from Hermione ascertained that Seamus Finnegan and Ron Weasley had clapped their hands over Malfoy's mouth, and was resisting any attempt by Crabbe and Goyle to allow the self-proclaimed 'Slytherin Prince' to continue speaking.

"What?" Harry said, unwillingly echoing his adversary. "But... but..."

"If you just come with me, Mr Potter, everything shall be explained," Professor McGonagall said, as she looked between Harry and Hermione, both of whom were growing ever more confused about what was going on. "If you wish, Miss Granger, you can come along with your brother; he would doubtless tell you what is about to take place even if you weren't there."

"Um... OK..." Hermione said, as she and Harry exchanged a momentary confused look as they continued to walk into the castle. As they marched deeper and deeper into Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione reached over to grab each other's hands and give the other a brief, reassuring squeeze before they finally stopped in front of a classroom and McGonagall opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, might I borrow Wood for a moment?"

As the classroom door opened fully, 'Wood' walked out of the room, revealing himself to be a fifth-year Gryffindor who was looking at Harry and Hermione with a confused expression.

“Potter, Granger, this is Oliver Wood, captain of the Gryffindor House Quidditch team,” McGonagall explained, as she turned back to look at the fifth-year. “Wood- Mr Potter, I believe, is your new Seeker.”

Wood’s expression changed from confusion to delight.

“Are you serious, Professor?”

“Absolutely,” Professor McGonagall said crisply. “I’ve never seen anything like it; the boy’s a natural. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?”

Harry could only nod, as he and Hermione looked at each other in surprise. They’d read a bit about Quidditch while preparing for their flying lessons, and Harry in particular had enjoyed the descriptions of the sport, but to be told that they were actually interested in having him *play* it...

“Yes, he looks just the build for a Seeker, too,” Wood said, checking Harry over approvingly. “Light, speedy- he’ll need a decent broomstick, a Nimbus or a Cleansweep, I should say... Don’t you agree, Professor?”

“I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and ask if we can’t bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows we need a better team- *flattened* in that last match against Slytherin, I couldn’t look Professor Snape in the face for *weeks*...”

Exchanging a brief glance at that comment, Harry and Hermione chuckled slightly at the thought of giving Snape something *else* for the Potions Master to be annoyed at Harry about...

Back down in the Great Hall, Harry’s continued presence at the Gryffindor table met with mixed reactions; the Gryffindors and the Slytherins may both have been unable to believe that he was still here, but the Gryffindors were mainly impressed while the Slytherins just seemed shocked. Harry was just grateful that nobody knew about what had happened during their time away; Fred and George, Ron’s twin brothers, had come up to congratulate Harry, but since they were

on the team as well, that only made sense as far as Harry was concerned.

Then, just as he was finishing the last of his steak, Malfoy showed up again with Crabbe and Goyle, his arrogant swagger now restored.

"Having a last meal, Potter?" he said, glaring the typical 'Malfoy meets muggle-borns' glare; the one that reminded Harry and Hermione of someone who'd only discovered they'd been walking in dog's mess *after* they got into the house. "Wanting to stock up on decent food before you have to go back to disgusting old *muggle* dining?"

"*Actually*, Malfoy," Harry said, glaring back at the other boy, "not only is my mother's lasagne pretty much to *die* for, but I'm not going anywhere; I'm staying right here at Hogwarts, thanks very much."

"A lot braver now you've got your little friends around you, aren't you?" Hermione put in, leaning forward to smile at Malfoy in a mocking manner. She knew this was a bit of a risk, of course, but given that they were in the most crowded room in the castle, she doubted even these three idiots would try something.

Malfoy evidently didn't care for that comment; he quickly turned to glare at Harry, his 'confident' expression on his face (Harry was always reminded of his uncle's odd attempts to appear a figure a firm but likeable figure of authority; both were so obviously fake he was amazed that the rest of the world didn't see through it at once).

"I'll take you on any time, Potter-" he began.

"Really?" Harry said, glaring back at Malfoy. "Then why don't you suggest the duelling tournament to Quirrell? Maybe we can get some extra credit for it!" A part of him was fairly sure that Quirrell wouldn't be too open to such a suggestion- in all fairness, the man stuck to a curriculum that seemed to take a long time to get its point across- but the point of the 'threat' still stood.

Harry had heard all about wizard duels, and, as far as he was concerned, he was *not* going to get into a fight with Malfoy just

because this git wanted to show off. When he was sure he was ready to get into a fight, *then* maybe they'd draw wands...

Until then, he wasn't going to give Malfoy the satisfaction of provoking him.

Malfoy's face paled slightly, but, to his 'credit', he didn't show any more reaction; he just turned around and walked away from the table, silently fuming as he did so.

Glancing over at each other, Harry and Hermione chuckled briefly.

"What's his problem?" Ron said, from where he was sitting just a couple of feet down from them, indicating Malfoy with his knife.

Harry shrugged casually as he looked back at Ron. "Just annoyed that his 'cunning plan' to get me kicked out didn't work," he said off-handedly, before looking curiously at Ron. "Uh... you wouldn't happen to know any decent books about Quidditch, would you? Just... well, long story short, I'm not too sure on the rules, and with the Quidditch season starting here, I'd like to know more about it..."

"What?" Ron said, looking at Harry in surprise. "You've never learned about Quidditch?"

As Ron launched into an animated discussion about the game, Harry smiled slightly as he and his sister listened. It was moments like these that he hoped would allow Ron to see that Harry wasn't interested in his 'celebrity status' and was just as mortal as everyone else...

Maybe *then* people would stop treating him like he was the reincarnation of Merlin and start treating him as a normal person...

As they walked back to the common room, Hermione insisted on taking a detour to the library to borrow a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* for future reading. Ron, still eager to discuss the specifics of the game, had accompanied them on the way, and was currently providing them with a detailed description of some of the games that he often played back at his house with his brothers. He was just in

the middle of describing some of the positions of the game- Fred and George's Beater skills had been constantly applauded- when, all of a sudden, the stairs the three of them were on moved from its original position to line itself up with another doorway, on the opposite side of the hall and at least two storeys down from the doorway that led to Gryffindor tower.

"Great..." Ron groaned, as he glanced at his watch before looking back at the door. "We'll *never* make it back to the common-room in time now..."

"Don't worry; we'll get there in time," Harry said, glancing over at Ron reassuringly before looking back at his sister. "You're the one with the photographic memory, Hermione; any ideas?"

Hermione stuck her tongue out at her brother in a teasing manner, but nevertheless nodded and quickly checked their new surroundings.

"Uh... this way, I think", she said, indicating the left-hand corridor. Shrugging casually, Harry and Ron hurried after her, constantly glancing around to try and spot anything that they could use to 'navigate' back...

Then a faint purr struck their ears from a corridor that they'd just been about to turn down, and the three froze.

If that wasn't Mrs Norris- the cat belonging to the well-loathed caretaker Argus Filch- Harry would be *very* surprised...

Hermione didn't need to say anything; instantly, the three of them turned and ran back the way they'd come, praying that they'd manage to get away from Mrs Norris before she saw them and 'summoned' Filch...

"This way!" Ron yelled, grabbing a nearby door handle and tugging on it, only to be horrified when it didn't open.

"Oh for crying out- *Alohamora!*" Hermione cried, waving her wand. The door opened, and Ron, Harry and Hermione quickly dived into the room, Harry shutting the door as quietly-yet-quickly as he could, and the three of them then pinned their ears to the door to wait. For a

few moments, none of them could breathe, wondering if Filch would tear the door open and have them all marched off to detention- never mind that there was still at least half an hour before they had to be in their dorms- but luck seemed to be on their side; nothing happened.

They were safe.

“Phew...” Harry said, glancing over at Ron and Hermione before turning back to look at the room they had entered...

And his jaw dropped in horror.

Standing behind them, drool hanging from its jaws, teeth bared that would have put a sabre-toothed tiger to shame, was a large, three-headed dog about the size of Harry's room back home. A part of Harry's mind registered that there was some kind of wooden door in the floor under the dog's paws, but the rest of him was focused more on the immediate problem he, his sister, and his... acquaintance, for lack of a better term... now faced.

This place wasn't a room.

It must be the forbidden corridor on the third floor.

And now the three of them knew *why* it was forbidden...

“*RUN!*” Hermione yelled, as the dog lunged towards them, its jaws wide open as though preparing to bite them. Harry and Ron didn't need telling twice; grabbing the door-handle, they dived out into the corridor, uncaring of the consequences if Filch would catch them, but, as Hermione shut the door behind them, the corridor appeared blissfully deserted. Evidently Filch must have missed them and just gone on past the corridor, but right now, they just wanted to put as much space as possible between them and the dog. They didn't stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, who, gratefully, had remained in her portrait; she was known to wander off at times.

“Where have you three been?” she asked, looking at them critically.

“Never mind *that*- pig snout, pig snout,” Harry said, breathlessly. As the portrait swung open, they scrambled into the common-room and collapsed, trembling, into armchairs, before Ron spoke.

“What do they think they’re *doing*, keeping a dog like that locked up?” he said, staring ahead at nobody in particular. “If any dog needs exercise, *that* one does!”

Hermione sighed slightly as she glanced over at Ron.

“You don't use your eyes, do you?” she said, leaning forward to stare critically at Ron. “Didn't you see what it was standing on?”

“I wasn't looking at its *feet*!” Ron said, staring incredulously at Hermione. “I was a bit preoccupied with its heads!”

“No, she’s right...” Harry said, nodding thoughtfully as he looked back at Ron. “It was standing on a trap door. It wasn't there by *accident*...”

He clicked his fingers as inspiration struck. “It's *guarding* something...”

“What?” Ron said, staring at Harry in confusion. “What could be worth guarding like *that*?”

Harry couldn't be certain, of course, but he thought that he had an idea as to the answer to Ron's question. After all, it had been nearly three months, and there'd been no sign of the package that Hagrid had taken from Gringotts... and Hagrid *did* say that Hogwarts was the only place safer than the aforementioned bank...

It looked like the contents of vault seven hundred and thirteen had finally been located.

Chapter 11 – Halloween

Any hopes that Harry and Hermione had possessed that Ron would be less on-edge around them after they had nearly ended up dog food together quickly proved fruitless; if anything, Ron was even *less* comfortable in their presence now than he had been prior to their little ‘Cerberus’ encounter. Hermione, the psychology ‘expert’ out of the two of them, assumed that Ron was embarrassed that it was his choice of door that had nearly resulted in them being eaten, and was therefore trying to avoid talking to either of them about that or, indeed, anything at all.

The two of them, however, had more to occupy their minds than this minor problem. Having worked out that the package in vault seven hundred and thirteen had been transferred to somewhere in Hogwarts had given Harry and Hermione something new to focus on, now that they know that there’d been an actual *purpose* behind the action, but as all they knew about the object was that it was around two inches long, and was either very valuable or very dangerous, their chances of guessing what it was without an additional clue seemed slim. Given their lack of progress as far as solving the mystery of the dog went, all they really wanted right now was a chance to do something that would *really* annoy Malfoy, and, much to their joint pleasure, the chance for them to do just that came only a week after the famous/infamous flying lesson.

As the owls flew into the Great Hall (Hedwig bringing a letter from Alan and Jane about recent events back in the muggle world), everyone’s attention was instantly drawn to a long, thin package that was being carried down by no less than six barn owls. As Harry and Hermione looked up at it, to their amazement, the package was deposited in front of them, nearly knocking over Harry’s goblet as the owls flew off. Ripping open the letter, Harry and Hermione read it simultaneously.

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE
It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don’t want everyone knowing you’ve got a broomstick or they’ll all want one.
Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch pitch at seven

o'clock for your first training session.
Professor M. McGonagall

"A Nimbus Two Thousand..." Hermione breathed, as she turned to look at Harry. "That's meant to be the best one there is!"

"Wow..." Harry said to himself, staring down at the package, before quickly swallowing his last sausage and glancing hastily over at his sister. "Let's get it up to the dorms before anyone else starts asking awkward questions."

Nodding in agreement, Hermione quickly ate her last egg, Harry picked up the parcel in his left hand, and the two of them headed towards the main doors. Unfortunately, when they were only halfway across the entrance hall, they ran straight into Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, the resident Slytherin gorillas baring the way while Malfoy snatched the package from Harry, giving it a brief inspection before looking back at Harry with a malicious grin.

"You're for it *now*, Potter," he said, as he tossed the package back to Harry, although Harry didn't need an expert to know that Malfoy was barely concealing a tinge of jealousy and attempting to emphasise his spite to cover it up. "First years aren't allowed broomsticks-"

"Oh, and did that seem to bother *you* back in Madam Malkins?" Hermione interrupted, smiling slightly at Malfoy's momentary shocked expression. "I don't know who you think you're scaring with this ridiculous attitude of yours, or why you think *anyone* is even remotely impressed by it, but, quite frankly, you can just go and jump in the lake until someone's interested in talking to you, OK?"

Malfoy seemed about to say something in retaliation, but then the 'conversation' was interrupted by Professor Flitwick appearing by Malfoy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys and girl?" he squeaked.

"Potter's been sent a broomstick, Professor," Malfoy interjected quickly, evidently eager for a reason to get Harry and Hermione into trouble.

“Oh, it’s here already?” Flitwick said, beaming at Harry. “Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter-congratulations, by the way; your parents would be proud. What model is it?”

“It’s a Nimbus Two Thousand, Professor,” Harry replied politely, trying to conceal his glee at the horrified expression on Malfoy’s face; the spoilt brat evidently couldn’t believe the idea that a ‘mere’ muggle-born could be openly allowed a broomstick when *he*, with all his money and his ‘pure-blood’ supremacy, had to smuggle one into school if he wanted it. “And,” he added, grinning slightly as he turned back to look Malfoy in the eyes, “it’s all thanks to Malfoy here that I’ve got it.”

Taking advantage of Malfoy’s stunned silence, Harry and Hermione quickly ran up the stairs to the common-room, somehow managing to smother the worst of their laughter despite a few giggling fits.

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase. “I’d never have known I could fly like that if he hadn’t tried to steal the remembrall...”

As soon as they’d reached the currently deserted common room, laughter now subsided, Hermione quickly checked the stairs to make sure that nobody else was coming (The common room seemed, somehow, the more *apt* place to open the package; after all, it was something that would affect all of Gryffindor House), and then Harry quickly tore the wrapping paper off, leaving the broomstick lying on the table in the middle of the common room.

“Wow...” Hermione breathed, as she and Harry stared at the broomstick before them. They may know nothing about brooms as a whole, but this one looked incredible; sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and *Nimbus Two Thousand* written in gold near the top...

It was brilliant.

Harry couldn’t wait to try it out that evening.

A few hours later, their lessons over, Hermione headed off to the library to look up some information for an essay the two of them were working on (Her reading abilities were significantly faster than Harry's, making it easy for her to find a specific piece of information in a remarkably short time), and Harry headed for the Quidditch pitch via the most discreet route possible, determined to avoid any questions about his broomstick until he was ready.

Having reached the stadium, Harry spent a few moments studying it, taking note of the vast amounts of seats and the three hoops at either end (Rather like what he and Hermione had used to blow bubbles back when they were younger) before he took to the air for a brief practice flight, managing to get around the stadium at least three times before Wood arrived. The rules of Quidditch turned out to be fairly easy to get your head around- Harry quickly found himself sorting it into three 'different' games in his mind, with the Keeper and the Chasers playing in one game, the Beaters the second and the Seekers the third- and, when practicing with the golf balls being thrown around, Harry easily caught all of them. Gratified by Wood's enthusiasm for his skills, coupled with the feeling of being good at something that it seemed he *wouldn't* be competing against his sister in, Harry smiled gratefully as he landed.

It was official; he was *definitely* going to enjoy this, although he wondered how Alan and Jane would feel about him being on a school sports team; he'd never been a very athletic personality back at school...

It came as a significant surprise to Harry when he checked his calendar and found that it was already Halloween; he and Hermione had been at Hogwarts for two whole months, and the castle already felt as much like home to them as their house had back when they were growing up. Even the lessons were becoming more entertaining rather than trying now that they'd mastered the basics, although a few of the other students still seemed to be having trouble in some classes; Neville *still* went to pieces in Potions, and Ron in particular often had some trouble when it came to pronouncing his Charms incantations correctly.

It was most likely this factor that prompted the argument in Charms on that fateful Halloween. At first the lesson seemed like it would be perfectly pleasant; Flitwick was finally teaching them how to make objects fly, something they'd been longing to do ever since he made Trevor, Neville's toad, fly around the classroom during their first lesson. The class were divided into pairs to practice, Harry working with Seamus Finnegan while Hermione ended up partnered with Ron, who seemed determined to avoid looking at her unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of the pile of books that he seemed to need just to address the students; Harry wondered if he ever *read* any of them. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

A part of Harry wondered how that could have happened- the spells for making objects fly and the spell for turning an object into a buffalo couldn't be *that* similar, could they?- but he soon found himself with more to concern himself as he and Seamus proceeded to attempt to move their feather. He managed to pull it off fairly easily- it took him a bit more time than Hermione, who seemed to have a natural art for magic, but he still made it fly a few feet- but Seamus was a lot less capable; he accidentally set the feather on fire when his turn came, and Harry had to ask for a new one.

Ron, on the other hand, was clearly getting frustrated; Hermione had tried to be patient and allow him to go first, as part of a way of apologising for what she and Harry had put him through during their near-death encounter with the dog, but he was proving woefully inadequate at getting the feather off the table.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" the red-haired boy shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill and failing to make any impression on the feather before him.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap, causing him to sigh slightly; he loved his sister, but she *did* tend to go a bit over-the-

top where school subjects were concerned at times. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa; you have to make the *gar* nice and long

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her robes, flicked her wand, and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Instantly, their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, bravo!" Professor Flitwick cried, clapping as Harry, in a spirit of fun, borrowed a feather from a nearby table and sent it up to hover alongside his sister's. "Everyone, see here, Mr Potter and Miss Granger have done it!"

Glancing over at Ron as the rest of the class politely applauded, however, Harry was quick to realise that his dorm-mate wasn't as happy about it as the rest of the class; on the contrary, he was glaring at Hermione as though he was nearly ready to blow his top at somebody.

As it turned out, Harry missed the actual confrontation due to being held back at the end of Charms (He'd somehow ended up giving Seamus more miniature lessons on how to levitate the feather than he'd expected), but he was told all about it by Hermione later when they met in their next class and Ron was nowhere to be seen.

"He just blew up and started yelling at me as soon as we were out of the classroom!" Hermione said, looking at Harry in a mix of confusion and shock as they worked on potting the plants they had to work on in Herbology. "He kept on yelling about how he was trying his best, there was no need for me to put anyone else down just because I was practically Harry Potter's sister, it was a wonder anyone could stand me..."

Sticking his current plant in its pot, Harry took off his gloves, leaned over, and pulled his sister into a comforting hug.

“Relax, Hermione...” he said, patting her reassuringly on the back as she shook slightly in confusion and rage. “It’s OK... you know you’re not putting anyone down deliberately... he was just frustrated... it’s nobody’s fault...”

But even as he held his sister, feeling her calm down as they spoke, he privately made a mental note to have a few words with Ron the next time the two of them saw each other.

Ron being cool towards *him* was one thing.

Being angry at his *sister*... the first person he’d ever met who genuinely cared about him...

Harry wouldn’t tolerate that.

If Ron didn’t apologise soon, he and Harry were going to have *words*...

The subsequent decorations at the Halloween feast, however, put any thoughts of the still-absent Ron (According to Dean Thomas, Ron was roaming the school corridors as though trying to work through his anger) right out of Harry’s mind. A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet, and Harry was just about to have a baked potato when the main doors opened and Professor Quirrell came charging into the hall, screaming “TROLL! There’s a TROLL IN THE DUNGEON!”

Instantly, everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to look urgently at Quirrell. However, the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher wasn’t very forthcoming with further information; he simply blinked a few times, said, “Thought you ought to know...” in a significantly quieter voice, and then collapsed to the ground in the middle of the hall in a dead faint.

After the initial silenced shock that accompanied a statement of that nature, for a few moments, there was an uproar as everyone stared

around at each other and began to talk in increasingly more panicked voices about what had just taken place, but then Dumbledore stood up at the staff table.

“SILENCE!” he yelled, and everyone fell quiet as they turned to look at him. “Prefects, lead your houses back to their common rooms! Teachers, come with me to the dungeon!”

Naturally, Percy Weasley was in his element, gathering all the younger students together, proclaiming that they’d be perfectly safe so long as they did what he wanted, he was a prefect, all that stuff...

It was only after they’d left the Great Hall that Harry realized something.

“*Hermione!*” he hissed, grabbing his sister’s sleeve and yanking her into a side corridor. “Ron doesn’t know about the troll!”

Hermione briefly looked like she was about to protest- not that Harry could blame her; Ron *had* been overly harsh after Charms- but she shook that off and simply nodded.

“All right, fine,” she said, jerking her thumb behind her. “I’ll go this way, you go the other way; trolls are generally rather slow and stupid, so we should be able to get away from it if it tries to attack us when we find it.”

Then, letting the scholarly side of her drop for one of those rare moments that only her family ever saw, she leaned over and hugged Harry, giving him a brief kiss on the cheek as she pulled back.

“Take care, OK?” she said to him.

Harry smiled back at her and patted her briefly on the shoulder.

“Always do,” he said, before the two of them turned around and ran down the corridors, each scanning their surroundings for the distinctive red of Ron’s hair.

After a few moments, however, Harry quickly began to suspect that he may have made a mistake in suggesting that they split up. He was

already fairly sure that he'd turned back on himself at least twice, and currently had no idea where he was in relation to the Great Hall, never mind where he was as far as possible locations where Ron may have gone to...

Then, as he rounded yet *another* corner, he saw Ron standing at one end, staring out a window, and smiled in relief.

"Hey, Ron!" Harry yelled down at his fellow Gryffindor, who looked back at Harry briefly before turning back to look at the window, only giving a brief grunt to indicate that he even acknowledged that Harry was even there.

"Look," Harry said, as he walked up beside Ron to stare at his dorm-mate. "I know Hermione can seem a bit... *fussy*... at times, but trust me; once you get to know her, she's really not all that bad."

Ron just grunted again, and Harry groaned.

"You know, you're not doing anyone any favours by hanging around down here," he said, glaring critically at Ron. "We've got a *troll* walking about the place, and Hermione and I abandoned the chance of hiding away in the common-room for the sole reason that we wanted to make sure you were all right, so if you'd rather we just left you out here to get-"

A sudden scream tore through the air, and Ron looked sharply at Harry.

"What was *that*?" he said, a sudden expression of fear on his face.

Harry didn't bother to reply; quickly scanning his surroundings, he noticed a door at the end of the corridor, a door that hung open...

And had a troll in it.

At least, Harry assumed it was a troll; it was around twelve feet tall, with grey granite-like skin, and resembled a boulder with long lanky arms and a large club in one hand.

Following Harry's gaze, Ron swallowed slightly as he saw what Harry was looking at, and then turned to look nervously at the 'Boy Who Lived'.

"You can't seriously be thinking..." he began.

"We don't have a choice!" Harry yelled, indicating the door. "We don't have time to get someone else to deal with this, in case you hadn't noticed!"

Ron seemed about to protest, or at least run away, but Harry grabbed his arm and stared at his fellow Gryffindor.

"You're in Gryffindor," he said simply. "I need you to act like it."

After a moment's hesitation, Ron nodded, Harry smiled, and the two of them turned and ran towards the door. As they entered the room, they saw that it was an old classroom, apparently one of the numerous extra rooms that seemed to be in the classroom these days...

Then Harry realised who'd screamed, and his blood ran cold.

It was Hermione, currently cowering under a desk as the troll advanced towards her, its club raised as though it was prepared to crush her.

"NO!" Harry yelled in horror, causing the troll to turn and stare in the direction of the noise that had just been made.

Harry didn't even stop to think; he yelled, "Confuse it!" over to Ron, grabbed a leg from a desk that the troll must have broken upon its entry and hurled it towards the troll, following it up by yelling to his sister, "Hermione, MOVE!"

As the troll turned to look in the direction of the yell, Hermione didn't stop to protest; she just dived out from under the desk and headed straight for the nearest wall, already trying to find her wand in her robes.

“Hoy, pea-brain!” Ron yelled, throwing another desk-leg at the troll as it began to advance towards Harry. As before, the yell rather than the leg was what attracted the troll’s attention; as it turned towards Ron, Harry glanced over at his sister and saw, to his horror, that she was still trying to come up with a spell to deal with the troll; she was good in the classroom, but evidently needed more practice when it came to thinking on her feet in a crisis.

She always does this... Harry groaned, remembering their bullying encounters back in school; he’d jokingly commented to Hermione once or twice that, if faced with a mugger or similar criminal, he’d be the one who’d just try and knock the guy out, while Hermione wouldn’t make a move until she’d consulted a book on the weakest points of the human anatomy and how hard you needed to hit them in order to put the other guy down for the count.

He just wished he *hadn’t* been so right in that assessment.

With the troll advancing on Ron and his sister as good as useless for the moment, Harry did something that was both brave and stupid; he took a great running jump and landed on the troll’s back, wrapping both arms around its neck in a desperate attempt to buy his sister and Ron some time. The endeavour was only partially successful; his intent to distract the troll just with his own weight failed, but he *did* manage to stick his wand up its nose; the item in question had been in Harry’s hand as he jumped onto his opponent’s shoulders. Roaring in rage, the troll raised both hands, grabbing at Harry with the left while waving the club around in a threatening manner in the right...

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*” a voice came from off to one side.

Ron? Harry thought to himself in surprise. *But...*

Then the troll’s club floated out of its hand, and Harry didn’t have time to wonder how Ron could have mastered a spell that had been giving him trouble only a few hours ago; desperately, he dropped off the troll’s back as the club landed squarely on its owner’s head. For a moment, the troll just stood there, blinking dazedly, and then it leaned forward and collapsed onto its face, as though it was so idiotic that not even its *nerves* operated at a normal rate.

As it lay on the ground before them, Harry got to his feet and walked over slowly to Hermione, who was staring at the form before her in silent horror. Reaching over, Harry placed a hand on her shoulder, and instantly Hermione had grabbed him and was holding him in her arms, once again shaking and sobbing into his shoulder, much like she had the first time she gave him a hug, shortly after they first met...

"Uh..." Ron said awkwardly from off to one side, indicating the troll as Harry and Hermione parted and turned to look at him. "Is it... dead?"

Looking at the troll, Harry shook his head.

"I don't *think* so," he said, as he walked over to look at the troll. "I think it's just knocked out."

As he pulled his wand out and wiped the troll bogies off it on the troll's trousers, he smiled over at Ron, still standing with his wand held out in front of him. "By the way, thanks; I wouldn't be here right now if you hadn't done that."

Ron looked at Harry in surprise for a moment, as though unwilling to believe that the 'Boy Who Lived' had actually, *genuinely* needed his help...

Then McGonagall, Quirrell and Snape burst into the classroom, and the potential bonding moment was gone; someone must have heard the racket the three (Or four, if you counted the troll) of them had been making. Quirrell turned slightly pale and staggered out of the room upon seeing the troll, clutching his heart, but Snape and McGonagall were glaring at the three of them with such rage that any hopes Harry might have entertained of winning any points for this incident were quickly dashed.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Glancing over at Ron, Harry was slightly put out to see that the other boy was still holding his wand; he looked like he was about to cast *another* spell. "You're lucky you weren't *killed*. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Harry looked sheepishly at his head of house, trying to come up with an explanation that *wouldn't* get everyone into more trouble, when Hermione spoke up.

"Please, Professor McGonagall, they- they were looking for me."

As Hermione walked forward slightly, the better to address McGonagall, Harry stared incredulously at his sister. It had been *his* idea to come looking for Ron that had got them into this trouble, and here his sister was, taking the blame for it...

Why?

"I was looking for the troll because... I-I thought I could handle it; I've read all about them." Swallowing nervously, she walked forward slightly to look McGonagall in the eye as she continued. "But I was wrong. If Harry and Ron hadn't come and found me... Harry distracted the troll and Ron knocked it out... I'd probably be dead."

Ron looked incredulously at Hermione, but Harry just looked at McGonagall, fingers crossed as he hoped and prayed that she'd accept his sister's admittedly rather feeble excuse...

After a moment looking at Hermione in a critical manner, McGonagall sighed.

"Miss Granger, how could you even *think* of tackling a fully-grown mountain troll on your own?" she said, holding up a hand to stop Snape's most-likely-instinctive attempt to say something that would try to put blame on Harry as well. "Five points will be taken from Gryffindor for your serious lack of judgement. As for *you* two..." she added, turning to Harry and Ron, before giving them a small smile. "I just hope you realize how fortunate you are; not many first year students could take on a fully-grown mountain troll and live to tell the tale. You will each win Gryffindor five points; I shall inform Professor Dumbledore of this. In the meantime, you may go back to your common room; students are finishing the feast in their respective houses."

Looking at each other, Harry, Hermione and Ron nodded briefly in agreement and ran out of the classroom; Harry was sure he felt

Snape's eyes glaring at the back of his head as they hurried away. He and Hermione hung back slightly as Ron hurried on ahead, his appetite evidently overcoming his earlier fear, but Harry didn't mind; it gave him a chance to talk to Hermione.

"Why?" he asked, looking at her inquiringly. "It was *my* idea to go after Ron-"

"And you already had one black mark on your record when you disobeyed the rules and went after Malfoy on your own," Hermione pointed out, looking critically over at her brother. "I haven't broken any major rules yet; it only made sense for me to take the fall this time round."

She shrugged. "Besides, you and Ron saved my life; the least I could do was help you out."

The common room was packed and noisy, with everyone eating the food that had been sent up from the Great Hall. Ron, however, stood alone by the door, evidently hungry (Based on the eager glances he kept shooting in the direction of the table), but equally evidently wanting to wait for them to arrive. There was a very embarrassed pause as the three of them stood around the portrait hole for a moment. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said "Thanks," and hurried off to get plates

But from that moment on, Ron Weasley was their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them, especially when, as in Ron's case, it helped him see Harry Potter as Harry Potter-*Granger*, rather than Harry Potter, '*the Boy Who Lived*'.

To Ron, Harry was now more of a normal person, rather than a boy who had been famous from the moment of his birth.

And Harry wouldn't have it any other way.

Chapter 12 – Quiddich Match

In the next letter they received from home, neither Harry or Hermione were surprised to be heavily criticised by their parents for their sheer idiocy in going wandering away from a group when they were perfectly aware that a large troll was wandering around the corridors. However, both Alan and Jane understood *why* Harry had decided to do something so foolish- Hermione had decided to tell their parents the truth even if the teachers had to remain in the dark- and were thus prepared to excuse their children, even if Jane *did* threaten to ground Harry and Hermione when they got home for Christmas if something like that happened again.

As time passed, however, the new trio were relieved to see that the weather seemed to be the only negative thing about the situation at present. As winter approached, the mountains around the school quickly became frozen and an icy grey colour, while the lake that the first years had come to Hogwarts by rapidly became frozen; how the giant squid that lived in there coped with being cramped below the surface without its traditional freedom was something that puzzled Harry. He also noticed Hagrid defrosting some of the brooms on the Quidditch pitch, but generally ignored the icy conditions unless he had to practice; he didn't want to get any colder than he had to. Fortunately, the Quidditch uniforms, such as the gloves and robes, managed to keep him fairly warm during practice, but he still wished that he wasn't out there whenever enough of the team could spare the time; he was going to get a cold if this kept up for much longer.

It was at moments like these that Harry was grateful for both Ron and Hermione's presence. Not only was Hermione able to help him keep up with his homework, but Ron was also able to give him several useful pointers about understanding a game of Quidditch, and how he could best help his fellow players- besides just finding the snitch, of course- without actually breaking any rules of the game. He had also spent some time re-reading *Quidditch Through the Ages*, which actually proved more engaging than it had the first time around; then again, Harry did have a more personal interest in the topic now, so he supposed it was only to be expected.

The day before Harry's first Quidditch match found the three of them out in the freezing courtyard during break, and Hermione had conjured them up a bright blue fire that could be carried around in a jam jar; it was a spell for which she was showing a particular aptitude, a fact that was of no small relief to Harry and Ron. They briefly had a close call when Snape passed close by them in the courtyard, but Hermione managed to shove the jar into her pocket before the Potions Master could see it. Harry was just grateful that he'd decided not to bring *Quidditch Through the Ages* out to continue reading it; he wouldn't put it past Snape to make some rule about books just so he could take points off Gryffindor.

It was only *after* Snape walked past them that Harry noticed that Snape was limping slightly; he also noticed a few flecks of blood around the teacher's shoe, as well as traces of a damaged and badly ripped trouser leg.

There was no way that the damage to that leg had just happened because Snape had had some kind of accident with a nail...

"Oh my God..." Harry muttered to himself, as he turned back to look at Ron and Hermione, taking care to keep his voice down to prevent Snape overhearing them. "I think Snape tried to get past the dog!"

"*What?*" Ron said, staring at Harry incredulously. "Are you *nuts*? Why would anyone want to even go *near* that dog?"

"And what makes you say that, anyway?" Hermione asked, looking curiously at Harry. "Did you see something I didn't?"

Harry was about to ask how that could have happened- Hermione was just as observant as him, albeit in a more factual rather than deductive manner- but, recalling her turning away to avoid attracting Snape's attention, realized it wasn't totally unexpected.

"Yes, his leg was injured; it looked like something had tried to maul him or something like that," Harry explained, as the three of them leaned slightly closer to prevent anyone else overhearing them. "So, unless you think one of the other student's cats got a bit annoyed at him for some reason, the dog seems our best bet for explaining *what* did it."

“But *why*?” Ron said, jerking his thumb after Snape. “What could he *want* to go past that dog for?”

“Look, you remember how Harry and I thought that the dog was guarding something?” Hermione explained, as the three of them began to walk back towards the castle. “Well, when Hagrid took the two of us around Gringotts when we were getting money out of Harry’s safe- it was our first time there, after all- he took something out of one of the vaults; all he told us was that it was Hogwarts business, and very secret. He also said that Hogwarts was probably the only place in the world that was safer than Gringotts for keeping something secret, *and* the attempted robbery on Gringotts- you know, the one where nothing was stolen- occurred shortly after the item was removed.”

“So you're saying...” Ron said, eyes widening as inspiration struck him.

“Exactly,” Harry said, nodding in agreement at his new friend. “That’s what the dog’s guarding.”

Turning to look at the door that Snape had recently entered the castle by, his eyes narrowed. “So, either he was just checking on something that dangerous because he somehow finds the prospect of near-death somehow exciting, or that item is what Snape’s after right now...”

He had no idea what the potions master was trying to accomplish by getting past that dog, but if Snape was trying to get what the dog was guarding for a good reason, Harry would eat his hat.

The next morning dawned with a bright sunny day, although it was significantly colder than Harry had been hoping; the robes would keep him warm when he was flying but he still would have preferred it if he’d had slightly better weather for his first time as Seeker. Even though he knew it was stupid, he couldn’t shake the feeling that even this slight bad weather indicated that something would happen to him on the Quidditch field...

“Harry, *eat* something, will you?” Hermione hissed, picking a few pieces of bacon off the grills in the middle of the table and putting them on her brother’s plate. “You need to keep your strength up!”

Harry just nodded grimly and tried to stomach the bacon; he couldn’t stop the grisly feeling that he was going to throw up at any minute when he thought too much about what he would be doing in front of the entire school...

His stomach improved slightly as he walked down to the changing rooms at eleven, trying *not* to think about the fact that the entire school was outside watching the game as he and the other team members shrugged on their red Quidditch robes; Slytherin were going to be playing in green.

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

“Okay, men,” he said.

“And women,” said Chaser Angelina Johnson; come to think of it, all three of the Gryffindor Chasers were women. Harry wondered if there was a reason for that, but decided it was probably just chance; he never understood people who claimed that they were better at a certain sport just because they were a certain gender.

“And women,” Wood agreed, nodding apologetically at the Chasers in question before turning back to the rest of the team. “This is it.”

“The big one,” said Fred Weasley.

“The one we’ve all been waiting for,” said George.

“We know Oliver’s speech by heart,” Fred whispered to Harry out of the corner of his mouth, “we were on the team last year.”

“Shut up, you two,” said Wood, glancing over at them harshly before turning back to look at the rest of the team. “Thanks to Harry, this is the best team Gryffindor’s had in years. We’re going to win. I know it.”

He glared at them all as if to say, ‘Or else.’

“Right. It's time. Good luck, all of you.”

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room, clutching his Nimbus in one hand, and, hoping his knees weren't going to give way, walked onto the field to loud cheers. Glancing over at the stands, he was partly heartened to see a large banner flying above the Gryffindor seats, proclaiming POTTER FOR PRESIDENT, a lion below it and the paints flashing in various different colors; the flashing was most likely Hermione's work, although he wasn't sure who'd have drawn the lion on the banner.

“Captains, shake hands!” Madam Hooch said from the middle of the field; she was serving as the referee for the game. As Wood shook hands with Marcus Flint, a burly sixth-year who looked part troll to Harry, Hooch looked critically at the Slytherin captain as though daring him to try something.

“Mount your brooms, please.”

Harry clambered onto his Nimbus Two Thousand, silently praying that he wouldn't screw this up now that the time to really prove himself had come...

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle, and, subsequently, fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

“And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor!” a voice said from one of the observation boxes. “What an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too-”

“JORDAN!” a voice called out over the current speaker.

A slight sigh, and then, “Sorry, Professor.”

Glancing over at the commentary box, Harry smiled slightly as he noticed Lee Jordan, a friend of the twins, standing there with some kind of microphone in front of him. McGonagall was standing just behind him, looking critically at the young man as though concerned he'd say something he shouldn't.

“And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve- back to Johnson and- no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes- Flint flying like an eagle up there- he's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle- that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field an- OUCH- that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger- Quaffle taken by the Slytherins- that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger- sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which- nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes- she's really flying- dodges a speeding Bludger- the goal posts are ahead- come on, now, Angelina- Keeper Bletchley dives- misses- GRYFFINDOR SCORES!”

Hovering above the field, Harry sighed slightly as he did a celebratory loop-the-loop to express some kind of enthusiasm for the goal scored. He hated to admit it, but a part of him wished that he was just watching the game right now; he knew his role was important, but spotting one speck of gold in this field was remarkably hard, even with the relatively dull weather. Glancing around the field, he smiled slightly as he noticed Hagrid edge his way through the crowds to join Ron and Hermione in the stands; he was grateful that his first real *wizard* friend would be there to watch the match as well...

Then he saw something.

A flick of gold as something flew past the Slytherin Chaser's ear.

“Was that the Snitch?” Lee Jordan called over the microphone, but Harry didn't stop to think about it; he tightened his grip on his broom and charged downwards towards the gold flicker in question. The Slytherin Seeker- someone called Terrance Higgs, he vaguely recalled from the introductions- did his best, but Harry's broom was far faster... he was level with Higgs... he was overtaking him... he was closing on the snitch...

WHAM!

Marcus Flint had deliberately blocked Harry, sending the broom flying off-course as the snitch disappeared, amid an outraged roar from the Gryffindors. Harry vaguely heard a few more specific comments- Dean Thomas seemed to be yelling about a red card, much to Ron's confusion- but he was too busy trying to regain his balance and start looking around once more for the snitch.

Lee Jordan, from what Harry could hear, wasn't all that happy about it either; Harry would hardly have called him neutral at the best of times, but now he was finding it extremely difficult not to take sides.

"So- after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating-"

"*Jordan...*" Professor McGonagall uttered warningly.

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul-"

"*JORDAN...*" McGonagall said once more.

"All right, all right... Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I'm sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinner, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession."

Watching it from the ground, Hermione wasn't entirely sure what had happened. One minute Harry was dodging a Bludger and continuing to scan for the Snitch, and then his broomstick suddenly shook as though it had become a bad-tempered horse. For a moment, Hermione wondered if this was some obscure Quidditch trick she didn't know about- was Harry feigning a lack of control to put the opposition off-guard?- but when he nearly fell off the broom completely, and only managed to maintain his grip at the last minute, she knew there was something wrong.

"It looks like he's lost control..." Ron said, in a puzzled, apprehensive tone as he stared at Harry's bucking broomstick. "But that's meant to be *impossible*..."

"Could something have happened when Flint rammed him?" Seamus Finnegan put in anxiously.

"Can't have done..." Hagrid muttered, staring in confusion at the broom through his binoculars. "No sixth year could have done that to a Nimbus Two Thousand; it'd take powerful dark magic ter do something like that ter a major broomstick..."

No... Hermione thought to herself, staring at her brother in horror. He can't die... he can't die... he can't survive the most powerful Dark Lord in history just to end up falling off a broomstick...

Distraught, she turned away from her jolting brother, trying to find something else to focus her attention on, and her eyes widened as she saw something in the Teacher's Box. Reaching over, she grabbed Hagrid's binoculars and held them to her eyes, nearly swearing as the view came into focus.

"What?" Ron asked, puzzled, as Hermione removed the binoculars with cold rage in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"*Snape*," Hermione growled, much to Ron's surprise; he'd probably never have expected that Miss Know-it-all Hermione Granger would actually *hate* a teacher. "He's jinxing the broom; look."

Ron took the binoculars and glanced through them. He instantly saw what Hermione meant; in the Teacher's Box, Snape's eyes were fixed on Harry and he was muttering nonstop under his breath.

"Leave this to me," Hermione growled, pulling out her wand and dashing along towards the Box, running through the stands and trying to ignore the vague sight- visible only through the corner of her eye- of her brother's broom jerking around constantly as it rose higher and higher, with any attempt to pull him into another broom resulting in failure...

Finally, she reached the Teacher's Box. Diving under the benches before anyone could see her, she crawled over to Snape's position. Pulling out her wand, she whispered a few well-chosen words and instantly Snape's robes were on fire. Taken by surprise, the Potions Master leapt to his feet, knocking several of the other teachers off-balance, and- yes- *Harry was flying steadily once again!*

True, he was going rapidly downwards, but at least he was going down at a steady rate; he must just want to get closer to the ground...

Then he clapped both hands to his mouth as though he was about to be sick. He reached the ground- he leapt off the broom- he coughed into his hands- and something gold emerged from his mouth.

"I've got the snitch!" he yelled, holding the gold ball above his head, amid cheers from the majority of the stadium; baring the Slytherins, nobody had wanted to see that house win.

An hour or so later, the three of them were walking with Hagrid back to his hut, the three Gryffindors still reveling in their house victory. True, Flint had tried to have Harry disqualified on the grounds that he had nearly *eaten* the snitch rather than *caught* it, but nothing changed the facts; no rules had been broken, and Gryffindor had won the match, a hundred and seventy points to sixty (Flint had scored five times while everyone was distracted by Harry's predicament).

"It was Snape," Hermione explained, as the four of them walked back to the hut. "He was jinxing the broomstick; he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," Hagrid said; evidently, he hadn't heard what Ron and Hermione had been talking about earlier in the stands. "Why would Snape be doing something like that?"

For a moment, the three friends looked at each other as they tried to decide what to tell Hagrid, but Harry eventually settled on the truth.

"Well... we think he's trying to get past that three-headed dog in the forbidden corridor," he explained, looking at Hagrid as he tried to work out his friend's reaction to the revelation. "We think he's after whatever the dog's guarding."

Hagrid stopped walking and stared incredulously at the three students.

"How do you know about Fluffy?" he asked.

"*Fluffy*?" Ron said incredulously.

"Yeah, he's mine," Hagrid explained, apparently ignorant of the main reason for Ron's shock; why had he called a pet that resembled the mythical guardian of the Greek underworld something like *Fluffy*? "Bought him off a Greek chappie a few years back, and leant him ter Dumbledore to guard the-"

"The what?" Harry asked.

"Shouldn't have told yer that," Hagrid grunted, as he turned away and continued to walk back towards his hut. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to *steal* it!" Hermione yelled as she hurried after Hagrid, closely followed by her brother and Ron. "Why would he try and kill Harry if Harry wasn't a danger to him?"

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" Hagrid said, staring back at Hermione in frustration. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn't try and kill a student! Now listen to me, all three of you, you're meddling in things that ought not to be meddled in. It's dangerous! What that dog is guarding is strictly between Professor Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel-"

"Oh, there's someone called Nicholas Flamel involved, is there?" Hermione asked, looking at Hagrid with her typical 'sweet' expression that she often used when trying to find something out.

It didn't work; Hagrid just looked furious with himself before turning around and stomping off back to his hut, leaving Harry, Ron and Hermione staring after him, a growing suspicion dawning in their minds.

Who was Nicholas Flamel...?

Chapter 13 – Christmas

As Christmas began to approach, the castle became increasingly more strange and remarkable- something that Harry and Hermione would have been prepared to claim was impossible only a month ago. It was becoming commonplace to see snowballs following various teachers- commonly Snape and Quirrell- around after classes until they had the chance to hit the teachers at a particularly embarrassing moment, commonly when they were about to start a lesson. The temperature was so cold that the lake was now covered with ice thick enough to apparently support an elephant, and any owl that made it through the blizzard had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid.

It was on days like these, more than anything, that made Harry wish Hogwarts included central heating. The stone castle may have been warm enough in the summer, but these days, apart from the fires in the Great Hall and common rooms, the classrooms were so cold that it was sometimes hard to hear the teachers over the chattering of teeth, and Potions in particular proved a nightmare, down in the dungeons that seemed as though nobody had improved them since the day the castle had been constructed. Admittedly, this last was for two reasons; the temperature was so cold that their breath rose before them in a mist and everyone huddled around their cauldrons regardless of the potential risks of the potion they were making, and Malfoy was once again taunting Harry and Hermione despite their best efforts to ignore him.

“I really don’t know who to feel sorrier for, really,” the ‘grease-haired ferret wannabe’, as Harry was beginning to think of him, said in one such Potions class. “Those people who have to stay here because they’re not wanted at home, or those people who have such *terrible* guardians waiting for them at their houses...”

Glancing over at each other from where they were measuring out powdered lionfish spine, Harry and Hermione just rolled their eyes in frustration. Malfoy’s initial comments about how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker may have been annoying for the first few days after the Quidditch match, but at least they were vaguely original. His repetitiveness about claiming that Harry had

terrible guardians simply because he grew up with muggles had been tedious since the second day in Hogwarts, and they weren't getting more original any time soon...

Still, Harry and Hermione typically distracted themselves by thinking about being home for Christmas in the next few days. Ron had signed up to remain at Hogwarts, along with his brothers- apparently his parents and sister were going to Romania to visit his brother Charlie, who cared for dragons. Harry and Hermione had assured him he was welcome to come back with them, but Ron had declined; Harry wasn't sure whether Ron genuinely wanted to spend time with his brothers this holiday, or if he was still just feeling a bit uncertain about treating 'The Boy Who Lived' like an ordinary person. In any case, he was staying in school, and Harry and Hermione were going back to their parents.

On reflection, Hermione had decided it was probably a good thing until they could give Ron a better grounding in the ways of the muggle world; she'd rather *not* have him accidentally blow up her computer or something stupid like that...

As they left the Potions classroom and began to walk up towards the main hall, the three friends were surprised to find a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. For a moment, Harry wondered if they had encountered a dryad or other similar creature, but then he saw the large boots below it, as well as a loud puffing sound, and realised that it was just Hagrid.

"Hi, Hagrid, want any help?" Ron asked, poking his head through the branches; the two of them had bonded rather well since Harry and Hermione had become friends with Ron, mainly due to Hagrid's earlier friendship with Ron's older brother Charlie.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron," the gamekeeper replied, grinning slightly at Ron's face through the gap in the tree.

"Want to earn some extra money, Weasley?" Malfoy's grating voice said from behind them. "Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you graduate, I'll bet- that dump of Hagrid's must be like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Ron seemed about to dive for Malfoy in a fit of rage (Not that Harry could blame him; that last comment of Malfoy's was *really* 'below the belt', in an almost literal manner) but Hermione grabbed his arm and stopped him; a good thing too, given that Snape had just come up the steps from the dungeon. Malfoy briefly looked disappointed, as though he'd been hoping to get Ron into trouble with the Potions Master (Which he obviously *had* been; the twit was incapable of doing anything else) but seemed to have enough sense not to continue trying to provoke anything. Instead he just glared briefly at Hermione and walked off, in the opposite direction, following Snape.

"I'll get him..." Ron fumed as he stared after the retreating Slytherin, who still seemed to be chuckling slightly at his 'joke'. "One of these days I'll get him..."

"Cheer up, it's nearly Christmas," Hagrid smiled at them, sticking his head out from one side of the tree so he could see them better. "Tell yer what, come with me an' see the Great Hall, looks a treat."

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

"Ah, Hagrid," McGonagall said, glancing over at the gamekeeper as he entered, "the last tree- put it in the far corner, would you?"

The hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, at heights that not even the highest ladders could have reached without taking up a stupid amount of space, and no less than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles. For a moment, Harry regretted that he wouldn't be able to see more of the castle in this state, but shook it off; he always enjoyed Christmas with his family, and he wasn't about to stop just because an alternative was now available. Besides, he was still looking forward to seeing Alan and Jane again, even if he was slightly concerned about what they'd think of his and Hermione's recent near-death experiences with the troll invasion and his broomstick turning into a wild horse...

"How many days you got left until yer holidays?" Hagrid asked.

"Just one," said Hermione, a slightly wistful expression on her face; she evidently felt the same way that Harry did about being home. "And that reminds me," she added, her expression becoming more serious as she looked at her brother and her friend, "Harry, Ron, we've got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library."

"Oh yeah, you're right," said Ron, tearing his eyes away from the fascinating-yet-bizarre sight of Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

"The library?" said Hagrid, following them out of the hall, looking at Harry and Hermione with a small smile visible under his beard. "Just before the holidays? Even fer you two, that's a bit keen, isn't it?"

"Oh, we're not working," Harry told his friend brightly. "Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we've been trying to find out who he is, and we're just having a bit of trouble finding the right book at the moment."

"You *what*?" Hagrid said, looking as though someone had just given him an electric shock. "Look, I *told* yeh, drop it; it's nothin' ter ye what that dog's guardin'!"

"We're just trying to find out who *Flamel* is; we're not doing *anything* regarding finding out what the *dog's* guarding," Hermione pointed out, with that casual smile that had so often won over their parents when they were at home. "Couldn't you give up even a *little* hint; we've been over pretty much the *entire* library already..."

"I'm sayin' nothin'," Hagrid replied simply.

"Well, looks like it's back to work," Harry said, shrugging casually as they turned around and headed for the library.

He just wished he *was* as confident as he sounded; so far, finding Flamel had been the equivalent of looking for a needle in a haystack. Harry had tried checking every book he'd ever consulted from the library, based on this nagging feeling he had that he'd read Flamel's name somewhere before, but so far he'd found nothing. Hermione was consulting every book possible on recent developments in

wizardry, such as *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century* (Taking time out to tease Harry slightly about his entry in the book, as always), while Ron just walked around the library and picked books off the shelves at random. Harry had thought about trying to get into the Restricted Section, but he knew that was only an exercise in futility; none of the teachers would give a first-year a permission slip to read anything in *there*...

After a search of yet another couple of hours had achieved nothing, the three of them made their way back to the common room, annoyed that, once again, they'd failed to find *anything* worthwhile about Flamel; not even his *name* had appeared in anything they'd read.

"Look, you're *sure* you'll remember to look for anything you can find about him again while we're away?" Hermione said to Ron as the three of them walked back to their dorm.

"Yeah, I'll remember," Ron said, nodding listlessly in a manner that told Harry Ron *would* look, but he probably wouldn't put that much effort into his search. In all fairness, Ron was a good friend to have in a tight spot, but if you wanted prolonged research into something that wasn't quidditch you were lucky if you could get him to focus for longer than a few minutes at a time...

As they got on the Hogwarts Express, however, Harry and Hermione felt free to banish all thoughts of their failed attempt at detective work and focus on the matter at hand; celebrating with their assorted cousins, aunts and uncles.

Their grandparents, as always, were unavailable- all four of them commonly went abroad for Christmas, although they were always back home in time for New Year's- and apparently Jeff and Anne Murray- Jane's brother and sister-in-law- had been called to New York on business with their children, but Philip Granger, as well as Tim and Kathryn MacDonald- Alan's brother, sister and brother-in-law- were all still available, along with Tim and Kathryn's three children, Natalie, Peter and Janet.

In some ways, Harry and Hermione were glad that it was going to be a fairly small Christmas this year; it limited the amount of people

they'd have to lie to about their new school. On her own, Hermione wouldn't really have been all that concerned- she'd never really managed to get *on* with her cousins, to be honest- but Harry had always made a more conscious effort to fit in with the family, ever since that first Christmas at Anne and Jeff's in Glasgow shortly after his adoption, and he generally got along well with them all.

Natalie in particular- the oldest one of the three, at around eight- had bonded with Harry considerably from the moment they met, although she and Hermione typically 'ignored' each other; indeed, Harry sometimes doubted that the two girls would interact at all if it weren't for him. For all that Harry had helped her become more emotionally available, Hermione was still more inclined to read books rather than play games with her younger relatives at Christmas.

Peter and Janet were generally neutral when it came to relations with their cousins and their older sister; they participated in the games, but since they were both only about six, they sometimes fell behind when playing with the older children, and conversations were generally problematic due to a lack of topics.

As they reached the station, however, neither Harry or Hermione were thinking much about the family reunion at Christmas; they were more focused on the immediate benefits of being away from Hogwarts.

Specifically, seeing their parents again.

"Hi Mum, hi Dad!" Hermione smiled, waving to where Alan and Jane were standing at the barrier as she and Harry walked through the barrier that separated the rest of King's Cross from Platform Nine and Three Quarters; Hermione had been the first off the train due to Harry having the added complication of needing to carry Hedwig's cage out of the compartment.

"Hello there, you two," Alan said, smiling briefly at his children before the smile faded slightly as he looked critically at Hermione. "Now, what's this I hear about you wandering off and running into a *troll*?"

"Uh..." Hermione said, sheepishly rubbing the back of her neck as she looked up at her father. "Look, if it helps, I assure you that

anything you've received about that troll thing is more than *slightly* exaggerated? It really wasn't *quite* as bad as it sounds when you put it like that..."

"Would it make any difference if I pointed out that it was *my* idea to split up in the first place?" Harry put in, looking over at Alan with an almost critical expression; it may be his father rather than a teacher, but he was still going to protect Hermione if he could. "And, if you're worried we did it just because we felt like it, we weren't looking for the *troll*; we were looking for another student who'd gone missing earlier, and Hermione just ran into the troll by accident."

Jane and Alan looked critically at Harry for a few moments, and then Jane smiled slightly at Harry.

"And you just dived in to save her when you heard her scream," she said, a small teasing grin on her face; she and Harry often had an affectionately bantering relationship. "You *always* have to be the knight in shining armour for your sister, don't you, Harry?"

"Once again, Hermione, I'd just want to be the Dark Knight *Detective*, if I'm any kind of knight; the armour for the classic versions would be too uncomfortable," Harry replied, giving his usual variation on his default answer. Ever since he'd started reading comics, he'd invariably favoured Batman and Spider-Man over most of the other heroes out there, although he thought Batman had the cooler costume; when asked, he simply said that the characters reminded him slightly of himself, and people generally left him alone after that.

"And a massive bullet-proof cape over equally bullet-proof body armour *wouldn't* be awkward to move about in?" Hermione asked teasingly as the four of them headed over to the car, Alan dragging Harry's trunk as his adopted son carried Hedwig's cage.

"That kind of armour clanks less than the alternative; plus, I'd be able to glide with the cape if the need arose," Harry said casually as he helped Alan haul his trunk into the boot of the car, smiling teasingly over at Hermione. "Anyway, what do *you* know about cool superheroes? *Every* Halloween you could, you went trick-or-treating as the Scarlet Witch!"

“So I always found something about her history appealingly tragic and thought that her costume was cool; what’s wrong with that?” Hermione retorted, grinning at her brother. “Aren’t those things the same reason you liked Batman?”

Harry sighed. “*Actually*, I’ve always felt that the most appealing thing about Batman was that he reflected a slightly darker side of the superhero ‘coin’, as well as the fact that he represents what anyone could be if we were that driven to make a difference in the world,” he explained, as Alan and Jane got into the front seat. Smiling slightly at each other as their children continued to talk about the benefits of Batman versus the Scarlet Witch, the Grangers began to drive back to their house, grateful that there were at least *some* things about their children that they could still relate to.

The next few days between the end of term and Christmas were composed of mixed activities; purchasing Christmas presents, preparing the house for the Christmas party- and, of course, a quick trip down to Diagon Alley to allow Harry and Hermione the chance to purchase a couple of present for Ron. Hermione had sent Ron a box of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans (Harry couldn’t understand the appeal of something that might taste like vomit, but Ron seemed to like them) and Harry, based on Ron’s constant talks about them, had sent him a book about a quidditch team called the Chudley Cannons that he’d mentioned was his favourite team.

As he woke up the next morning (At around six o’clock, he noted casually; he *always* got up stupidly early at Christmas), Harry glanced down at the foot of his bed, and was surprised to see a small pile of presents at the foot of his bed. At first he thought it was just the typical stocking presents- even after learning the truth about Santa Claus he and Hermione still enjoyed the secret thrill presented by their stockings- but no; the stocking was hanging by the bed, just as full as it always was.

Of course, recent events *did* seem to indicate that there was another option for what the presents were doing there.

His *Hogwarts* friends must have sent these by owl...

“Harry?” a voice whispered from the door.

"Hermione?" he said, sitting up in bed to look at the door, his sister's head peeking in through the door. He noticed a bundle of presents in her arms, and smiled slightly. "So, you got some presents too, huh?"

"Yeah, I know; nice of them, isn't it?" she replied, grinning at her brother as she came into the room. Harry noted that the two of them seemed to have received the same number of 'wizarding' presents-three, to be precise. Each of them had a large one that seemed to contain an item of clothing, one smaller parcel in brown paper with a note on it that had apparently been written by Hagrid, and what looked like a box of some kind.

"I mean," Hermione continued, as she sat down on the edge of Harry's bed, passing his presents up to him as she placed hers on her lap, "we've only known these people for a few months, and they're *already* sending us gifts? It was... nice of them to go to all the trouble, really."

"Mmm," Harry nodded, as he unwrapped Hagrid's pleasant, smiling slightly as it was revealed to be a wooden flute, evidently hand-carved. As Hermione unwrapped hers, they noted that she had a similar one, but they both still smiled in gratitude at the presents. If nothing else, given how fine the detail on the flutes seemed to be, Hagrid must have gone to a lot of trouble to make them, the thought and care were truly touching.

Putting the flutes off to the side, Harry picked up the clothing present and studied it curiously. "Who do you think this is from?"

"Well, I *do* recall Ron mentioning to me once that his mother often knits jumpers for him and his brothers- and Ginny, of course- at Christmas; maybe she sent us one each?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow as she looked at her brother. "After all, she seemed nice enough at the platform, and what could it hurt if she just sent us an extra present, right?"

Nodding thoughtfully at that, the two of them opened the presents, and smiled at each other as they revealed the thick woollen jumpers within the wrapping; Harry's was in a vibrant shade of emerald green while Hermione's was a deep, rich reddish-brown.

“Wow...” Hermione muttered, smiling as she shrugged the jumper over her head and looked at Harry. “We *must* have made a good impression on *somebody*!”

A sudden thought occurred to her, and she grinned teasingly at Harry. “Maybe a certain *female* Weasley...?”

“Hermione...” Harry said, glaring over at his sister critically, only to be met by the wrapping of the third present in his face as Hermione tore the wrapping off the box of chocolate frogs Ron had sent, chuckling slightly at her brother. Removing the paper from his face, Harry opened his present from Ron, and wasn’t all that surprised to find it was the same as Hermione’s. After all, Ron was limited in how he could purchase presents, given that he was confined to Hogwarts, and he’d only known the two of them for a couple of months anyway; how was he expected to know what kind of present would interest them?

Just as Hermione was getting up to gather the discarded wrapping-paper, she noticed, much to her surprise, that there was a fourth present, just under Harry’s bed, wrapped in simple paper and with a note attached to it.

“Uh... Harry?” Hermione said, taking the parcel out from under the bed and passing it to her brother. “Any idea who might have sent you this?”

“No...” Harry said, confusion evident on his face as he took the note that was on the parcel and opened it.

“‘*Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Merry Christmas to you?*’” he read, looking up at Hermione with a mixture of confusion and sudden eagerness on his face. “This... this belonged to my *dad*, Hermione...”

“But what is it?” Hermione asked, trying to conceal the familiar pang of jealousy whenever Harry’s *biological* parents were mentioned in her presence. She knew that he would always think of her as a sister despite their lack of a genetic link, of course, but whenever Lily and James Potter came up in conversation, she just couldn’t stop herself

feeling slightly resentful of two people who had such a hold on Harry's heart even though he'd never even met them...

However, any thoughts of jealousy over people who'd been dead for over a decade left her mind as Harry opened the parcel before him, revealing a silvery-grey cloak that shimmered slightly as it fell to the ground.

Both their jaws dropped as they realised what Harry held in his hands; at least three of the books they'd read had described this kind of thing in *very* great detail.

"An invisibility cloak..." Harry breathed, staring up in awe at Hermione as he got out of bed. Shrugging the cloak on over his shoulders, Harry glanced down and smiled broadly as he realised that the cloak was working just as it should; his body had vanished, leaving him looking as though he was just a head floating in mid-air.

"Wow..." Hermione whispered, as Harry experimentally pulled the cloak over his head and waiting a few seconds before shrugging it off, now standing in front of the window in his room; he'd evidently been looking at his new lack of a reflection.

"I know," Harry said, smiling as he looked over at his sister, folding the cloak up and laying it on the bed. "No two ways about it; *that* is going to be useful when we get back to Hogwarts."

"I know," Hermione said, smiling at him before she glanced at her watch. "We'd better get going; Mum and Dad will be awake by now."

A few hours later, Harry and Hermione were sitting around the kitchen table, their cousin Natalie sitting opposite them with a small grin on her face as she studied the cards she held in her hands. After unwrapping their stocking presents with their parents, Harry and Hermione had helped Alan and Jane arrange things for the arrival of the MacDonalds and Philip, who'd shown up at around two o'clock. It was now five, and, with presents unwrapped and everyone just waiting for the turkey to finish cooking, Alan, Jane, Tim, Kathryn and Philip were currently all talking in the front room while Peter and Janet played Hide-and-Seek with each other, leaving Harry,

Hermione and Natalie- a small blonde-haired girl with brown eyes and an expression of perpetual eagerness- to play various games of Trumps with assorted cards they'd acquired in their stockings. Currently they were using the Marvel Superheroes 'Top Trumps' Card deck, with Harry playing against Natalie while Hermione sat off to one side to play the winner.

"So, what's been happening to you two since summer?" Natalie asked, smiling casually at Harry; having won the last 'hand' of trumps (Professor X's intellect had, naturally, been more than a match for the Blade card Harry had been holding at the time), to say nothing of the six or seven 'hands' she'd won before that one, she apparently felt perfectly comfortable in taking a brief break to quiz her cousins, particularly since Harry only had one card left. "Mum told me Aunt Jane said the two of you had gone off to some boarding school up in Scotland; what's it like?"

"Oh, about what you'd expect, really," Harry replied, grateful for the temporary reprieve in his defeat; he really wasn't sure *what* factor on Natalie's next card could be played that would allow a *Cyclops* card to win it. "You know, a bit dull at times mixed in with the general interest of the lessons."

"Harry even ended up on our school house sports team," Hermione put in, smiling slightly at her brother; she knew she couldn't reveal *what* sport Harry played, but that didn't stop her having a little fun, right? "Turns out that he's got a naturally talent for the game- all it really requires him to do is stay on the move and avoid getting hit by the other side until everything's over."

"So, in other words, the game basically involves you doing what you've been doing whenever one of the school bullies gets a bit aggressive because you proved them wrong again?" Natalie asked, smiling over at her cousin. "I *knew* that you being smart would have another benefit!"

"Oh, knock it off, will you?" Harry retorted, glaring back at Natalie with a fake frown on his face as he looked at the young blonde girl who was looking back at him with a grin on her face. "Honestly, you'd think you'd have gotten over that old 'joke' of yours by now..."

“Don’t think you can change the subject like that; I’ll get back to it later!” Natalie retorted in a mock-warning tone, grinning as she picked a card out of her hand and laid it on the table. “I’ll be using Strength this time around,” she said, grinning broadly.

Glancing at the card his cousin had just played, Harry sighed; it was the Incredible Hulk.

“You win again,” he said, tossing the Cyclops card onto the table with a resigned expression; that had been the last card in his hand.

“YES!” Natalie smiled, grinning broadly as she punched the air in victory...

And at the same time, much to Harry and Hermione’s surprise, the cards in Harry and Natalie’s hands suddenly leapt into the air, floating in the air for a few seconds before falling back onto the table.

Harry and Hermione blinked in surprise at what they’d just seen before them.

That *was unexpected*, Harry thought to himself, as he looked up at Natalie’s confused face. *And there was me thinking we’d not have anyone else with magic in the family...*

However, looking at Natalie right now, he knew that this wasn’t the time and place to reveal the truth about what had just happened to her; if nothing else, how would Tim and Kathryn react to being told about magic on such short notice? They’d barely have any time to go into the kind of explanation that would be needed, particularly since Natalie couldn’t get into Hogwarts yet...

No, better to break it to Natalie gently, and then explain the *full* truth to Tim and Kathryn when she got her Hogwarts letter...

“Sorry about that; I think I jostled Harry’s arm when you jumped up like that,” Hermione said, smiling apologetically at her cousin; evidently she’d come to the same decision Harry had. “Just one of those freaky coincidences, I guess; you must have lost your grip when you leapt up like that.”

“Uh... yeah... sure...” Natalie said, looking slightly sheepishly at her older cousins. “Sorry; guess I got a bit overexcited.”

“Perfectly understandable; after all, this *is* the first time you’ve beaten me at *anything*,” Harry said, smiling in a joking manner back at Natalie; he’d quickly learned after meeting her that the best way to distract Natalie from anything was to give her something to be ‘mad’ at.

“*Hey!*” Natalie retorted, glaring back at Harry with a wide grin on her face. “That’s *totally* untrue!”

As the ‘argument’ began once more, the three children arguing back and forth about whether or not Natalie had ever beaten Harry at anything in the past, Harry smiled in relief at managing to avoid the more awkward line of questioning for the moment...

But, at the same time, he knew it would have to be addressed one day.

AN: Just to confirm for anyone reading, Natalie MacDonald was a Gryffindor first-year mentioned briefly in the Sorting scene of ‘Goblet of Fire’. I acknowledge that no reference was ever made to a link between her and Hermione in the books, but I wanted to add a new character to the series, and I’ve tried to explain my reasoning why a relationship wasn’t mentioned in the original series above; in *actual* continuity, Hermione and Natalie weren’t especially close, so they probably rarely spoke much to each other, but in *this* timeline Harry’s presence provided a balance (Much like he did for Hermione and Ron in the books), so the two of them found it easier to relate to each other

Chapter 14 – Micholas Flamel

The next morning, after the McDonalds had left and all the dishes from the previous day had been cleaned- Boxing Day was typically a quite day at the Granger household, generally spent with Harry and Hermione enjoying their new gifts from the previous day- Harry and Hermione finally found the time to tell Alan and Jane what they'd discovered about their cousin the day before.

"Natalie's *magical*?" Jane said, staring at her two children in surprise as they sat on the sofa opposite her and her husband. "You're sure?"

Harry nodded in response. "Pretty sure, anyway," he said, by way of explanation. "A bunch of Marvel Top Trumps cards flew into the air and stayed there for a few seconds just when she got excited about something; I'd say that's proof enough that she's not exactly your common or garden muggle."

Alan sighed slightly as he leaned forward, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers before he looked up at Harry.

"Well," he said, trying to sound relatively nonchalant about the recent discovery, "at least we know you won't have to keep lying to *everyone* about your school."

"Yeah, that's certainly a plus..." Harry agreed, nodding as he mused over the possibilities in his head.

He had to admit, it was a relief that he and Hermione would at least be able to talk to Natalie about Hogwarts, even if it still had to be kept secret from everyone else...

A thought suddenly occurred to him, and he glanced over at Hermione. "You think that Peter and Janet are magical as well?"

Hermione shook her head. "No; remember, Peter cut himself when he was trying to help carve the turkey and wouldn't go away when Kathryn told him to go away?" she said. "If he was magical, I think we'd have noticed something; if raw emotion's the trigger for it in

them like it was with us, he was certainly crying about the blood enough to cause *something* to happen.”

“It makes sense, certainly,” Alan said, nodding thoughtfully for a moment before looking back at his son inquiringly. “So, what do you want us to do? Tell Peter and Janet the truth about... well, your ‘extra talents’?”

Harry shook his head. “No, Dad; if we can’t provide any real *proof* of what we’re telling them, they’d just think you’d gone mad or something like that,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “Believe me, I wish it was that simple, but unfortunately it isn’t, so we’ll just have to pace ourselves a bit in telling them the truth.”

“‘Pace ourselves’?” Jane asked, looking in confusion at her son. “What do you mean?”

“You know, whenever we see her we try and drop subtle hints to Natalie that there’s more going on than she knows about, ask her how she’d feel about being able to do magic or at least have some kind of power, that kind of thing,” Hermione explained nonchalantly. “Nothing to suggest that we think she *can* do anything like that, just enough to give her some time to think about the idea, and then just... take it from there, you know?”

Alan and Jane looked at each other for a couple of moments as they thought over Hermione’s suggestion, until, finally, Alan nodded in agreement.

“OK, we’ll give your idea a try, Hermione,” he said, as he looked back at his daughter. “However, if one of her parents *directly* asks us what’s up with Natalie, I think we should tell them; I won’t start lying to my family if the truth is the obviously preferable alternative.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said, nodding in understanding. After all, lying about Hogwarts to people who’d never be able to actually see it was understandable enough- when would they ever see that it was anything other than the deluded ramblings of a family who’d apparently snapped?- but lying to someone who’d actually *have* to know about it some day...

Harry couldn't see how doing *that* would ever be the smart thing to do.

Personally speaking, if there was something that he needed to know about himself that had been concealed from him, he'd want to hear a *very* good reason for why nobody had bothered to tell him earlier...

A few weeks after Christmas, Harry and Hermione were back at Hogwarts, both of them still going over possible means of helping to reveal the truth about her new 'abilities' to Natalie at a gradual pace. They'd made a start after the Trumps game had ended, watching a couple of magic-related movies and asking Natalie what she thought of the possibility of having magical powers- she seemed to find the idea 'cool', if nothing else- but they still were reluctant to specifically mention Hogwarts.

After all, they couldn't provide any evidence in the short amount of time available- it would have taken too long to have sent an owl to Hagrid or one of the other teachers to come over to provide a more concrete explanation, to say nothing of the fact that it would have been stupid to bother them over something relatively trivial- so they didn't want to tell anyone anything until the time came when such an action *would* be necessary.

As soon as they'd had the chance to have a decent conversation with Ron- breakfast the day after they got back- Harry and Hermione had told him about Natalie's own magical abilities, hoping that he might provide an alternative viewpoint on the situation.

So far, he hadn't managed to give them anything helpful.

"So... your cousin's a witch?" Ron said, staring at Harry and Hermione incredulously, a sausage half-way to his mouth as he stared at his friends as though trying to decide whether or not they were joking; he evidently couldn't believe something like that wouldn't have been spotted earlier. "And you only found out *now*?"

"Well, in all fairness, would we *really* have had any reason to think she was one before we came here?" Hermione asked, indicating the great hall with a wave of her hand. "Even if we *did* see something that might have indicated that she could do magic, we probably wouldn't

have known what it *was*! We might have just dismissed it as some weird fluke or something like that!”

“Well... yeah, I s’pose...” Ron muttered thoughtfully, as he chewed on a sausage and swallowed it. “Wouldn’t know about making that kind of mistake myself, though; I mean, Mum and Dad *always* knew what had happened when we’d started doing accidental magic when we were younger...”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you call it,” Harry said, smiling slightly as he recalled all the times he and Hermione had done something nobody could really explain at the time. “Well, it certainly seems to fit; after all, it’s not like the kids can *control* what they’re doing...”

“Accidental magic is commonly triggered by some kind of intense emotion, right?” Hermione added, looking curiously at Ron. “You know, the kids are angry they can’t get something, that sort of thing, right?”

“Yeah, emotion’ll certainly cause the kids to start throwing stuff around the room if they’ve got magic in them,” Ron said, nodding slightly, a small smile on his face. “I remember when Ginny was about three and George stole her doll; we nearly had every knife in the house flying around after him until he managed to give it back to her.”

“*Ouch...*” Harry winced; he did *not* want to imagine what those knives might have done to George if they’d caught up to him, although he wasn’t sure that accidental magic could be focused enough to give someone a *fatal* injury...

“Anyway, putting aside the details of *how* we know, do you have any ideas about how we should break the news to Natalie that she can do magic?” Hermione asked, looking curiously at Ron.

Ron, however, could only shake his head.

“Sorry, I’ve got nothing,” he said, shrugging apologetically. “As I said, I’ve never been in that kind of situation myself, and I can’t think of anyone who *has* right now.”

For a moment, Hermione and Harry shared a disappointed glance at each other- it looked like they'd just have to tell Natalie the truth about herself the hard way- but then Hermione brightened as she looked back at Ron.

"Anyway," she said, an almost critical gleam in her eyes as she looked at her new friend, "have you had any luck figuring out who Flamel is yet?"

"Oh... uh, no, not really," Ron said, looking slightly awkward as he lowered his head to look back at his plate. "I tried checking a few things, but..."

"You couldn't really commit to anything, huh?" Harry said, sighing slightly in frustration as he finished the last of his sausages. "I don't know...maybe I should just try and figure out where I read that name before; it can't be *that* difficult..."

"You sure it's not just a coincidence?" Hermione asked, looking over pointedly at her brother. "I mean, you read so much fiction these days, is it possible you read the name 'Nicholas Flamel' in a book somewhere at some point and it's nothing more than some bizarre fluke?"

Harry shook his head. "No, it's definitely something *recent*; it must have been something I read since I came here, and we know that there isn't that much of a fiction section in the library here..." he said, frowning in thought. "Now that I think about it, it was *definitely* in something I read over the last few months... just once, but I definitely read it *somewhere*..."

"But *where*?" Ron asked, looking over at Harry. "We've checked over every book the school expects us to have, every book you guys ever got out the library to do some extra research, even every book you brought along for your *leisure* reading! What else *have* you guys read; the Chocolate Frog cards?"

As soon as the words were out of Ron's mouth, the three children had dropped their cutlery, regardless of how much was left on their plates, and were dashing back up to Gryffindor Tower. After a brief delay when they needed to give the Fat Lady the password, Harry

had charged up the stairs to come back with the metallic pencil case where he'd been keeping his Chocolate Frog cards since Christmas, had tossed it over to Ron and Hermione, and the three of them were rapidly going over the cards until Hermione finally called out to the others.

"Found it!" she yelled, smiling up at the two boys as she showed them the card.

"The Dumbledore card?" Ron said, looking at Hermione in confusion. "What could *that* have to do with-"

"Just listen!" Hermione said, as she looked anxiously at her friends before looking back at the card. "Professor Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, *and his work on alchemy with his partner Nicholas Flamel!*"

"Alchemy?" Harry said, looking sharply at Hermione. "Wasn't that meant to be the forerunner of modern chemistry? The alchemists at least *thought* that they could turn metal into gold, that sort of thing..."

"Yes..." Hermione said, nodding thoughtfully for a moment before suddenly sat up sharply, clicked her fingers in inspiration, and ran up the stairs to the girl's dormitories. Before Ron and Harry could do more than exchange confused glances she was running back down the stairs, a large old book clutched in her hands.

"I never *thought* about looking in here!" she said, looking slightly embarrassed with herself as she placed it down on the table and began to rapidly skim through it in search of something. "I checked it out weeks ago for some light reading!"

"*Light?*" Harry said, looking incredulously at his sister. "Hermione, *King Solomon's Mines* is light reading. *The Bone Collector* is light reading. *This* is just... *stupidly* thick!"

"My reading material, my rules," Hermione said briefly to her brother as she continued to rapidly flick through the pages, before she finally slammed the book open on the table in front of her, a broad grin on her face. "*Got it!*"

“And ‘it’ is...?” Ron asked, waving a hand in confusion.

“Nicolas Flamel’s the only wizard alive capable of making the Philosopher’s Stone!” Hermione said, grinning broadly at her brother and her friend, only to be disappointed when Ron’s expression just showed confusion while Harry’s was more thoughtful; evidently he *thought* he knew what she was talking about, but wasn’t entirely sure if it was correct.

“It’s all here,” Hermione said, glaring critically at Ron for a moment as she turned the book around so they could read it and tapping the relevant passage.

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera-lover. Mr Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

“Of course...” Harry whispered, enlightenment dawning in his eyes as he, Ron and Hermione looked at each other. “No *wonder* Snape seems to be after this thing; *anyone* would want it!”

“As much gold and life as you could ever want...” Ron whispered, staring up at the ceiling in awe. “Wow...”

For a moment, the three friends could only sit and think about the possibilities offered by the possession of such an item, but then Hermione slammed the book shut, bringing the three of them back down to Earth.

“We can’t let *anybody* else know about this until we’ve got a better idea of what’s going on,” she said, looking up at Ron and Harry. “The more people who know about this, the more risk there is that Snape will find out about it; we’ve got enough problems with him as it is without him suspecting that we’re on to him.”

Harry and Ron could only nod in agreement at that; they certainly *weren't* going to give Snape anything else he could use against them to take points off Gryffindor...

Still, Harry couldn't deny that he hoped Snape showed his true colours soon; he was just *itching* for the chance to punch that *bastard* in the face...

Unfortunately, the chance to get his own back on Snape for going after the philosopher's stone (If that *was* what they were dealing with) didn't seem to be forthcoming; indeed, barring the usual Potions lessons, the only significant thing Snape did over the next few weeks was, for reasons Harry couldn't even *begin* to guess at, decide to referee the next Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff.

George's thoughts on the matter once they first heard the news summed up Harry's own concerns rather nicely, even if his reaction was a bit overdramatic; if he'd been any higher up when he fell off his broom, he'd have broken something.

"*Snape's* refereeing?" George said from where he lay on the ground, spluttering through a mouthful of mud as Fred landed beside him to make sure his twin was all right. "When's *he* ever done something like that? You *know* he's not going to be fair if we look like we're winning!"

"It's not *my* fault!" Wood yelled at the team as they gathered around him, voicing their own protests. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape doesn't have any reason to pick on us!"

As Harry walked back to the dorms that night, he privately reflected that it wasn't Snape marking them down he had to worry about; if Snape wasn't going to try and take advantage of this *somehow*, he would be *very* surprised.

As he entered the common room, he smiled slightly as he saw Ron and Hermione sitting in a corner playing chess; for reasons he couldn't understand, Hermione had always found the game rather difficult, while Ron, despite his generally relaxed attitude to things like schoolwork, was actually rather good at the game.

How something like *that* could happen, Harry had no idea; maybe the universe had decided it was being too harsh on Ron and given him a decent tactical mind to make up for his apparent ineptitude in dealing with people's feelings...

"Something wrong?" Hermione asked, glancing up as her brother walked over to their table; she'd always known when he was worried about something just from the way he was walking.

"Snape's refereeing the next Quidditch game," Harry said.

Hermione and Ron's reactions to that statement were blindingly obvious; they both instantly jumped to the conclusion that Snape was going to use the opportunity to attack Harry.

"Don't play," Hermione said at once.

"Say you're ill," Ron suggested.

"Pretend to break your leg."

"*Really* break your leg," Ron put in, only to have Hermione hit him sharply in the ear with her hand.

"That is *not* helping the situation right now, *Ronald*," she said, glaring at her friend before looking back at Harry. "Look, you *can't* play with *Snape* on the field; there's going to be too many chances for him to take you out-"

"What, in front of a stadium *full* of people?" Harry retorted, looking critically at Hermione. "Even *Snape* wouldn't be desperate enough to try and kill me *there*; what have we actually *discovered*, even if he knew about it? That he's after the Stone? That there's a big dog guarding the entrance? That Nicholas Flamel made the Stone? How is *that* enough knowledge to pose a threat to him?"

He shook his head in a determined manner as he looked at his friends. "No, I'll play the game; if I don't, the Slytherins will just think I'm too cowardly to face Snape, and I am *not* going to give Malfoy *another* excuse to get on at me!"

Hermione rolled her eyes slightly as she turned back to the chess game in mock frustration, but Harry noticed the small smile on her lips and knew that he'd managed to reach her.

She saw the validity of his argument.

He just hoped he hadn't made the biggest mistake of his life...

A few days later, as her brother walked off to the field, Hermione couldn't help but grow increasingly concerned about her brother's chances of actually surviving this whole mess. Oh, she understood and agreed with his reasons why Snape *wouldn't* do anything- too public a place, they couldn't actually *prove* he was up to anything yet- but still... he was her *brother*.

She was allowed to be a *bit* nervous, right?

Plus, there *was* the unnerving way Snape kept on looking at her in class; every time she looked up and saw him looking at her, she suddenly had a sharp headache behind her eyes and felt as though she suddenly needed to put on her 'lying face' where it was impossible for anyone but Harry to know what she was thinking...

In any event, so far Snape seemed unaware of what they suspected about him and the stone, but, as she and Ron sat in the stands beside Neville, their wands up their sleeves in case something went wrong, Hermione couldn't help but be grateful that their school taught something she could actually *use* to protect her brother...

As the two teams flew up into the air in front of them, spreading out in preparation of the game ahead, something suddenly struck Ron in the back of the head.

"Oh, sorry Weasley, didn't see you there," the familiar drawl sounded from behind the three Gryffindors.

Hermione rolled her eyes slightly as she glanced back to look at the three Slytherins she'd come to call 'The Bad, the Ugly, and the Brain-Dead' (With Malfoy, naturally, being the 'Brain-Dead'; Crabbe and

Goyle were just as thick, but Malfoy was so stupid that he actually tried to be *clever*).

"Tell me, what, beyond being the human equivalent of dog's droppings in the soles of your shoes, are you actually *doing* here?" she asked, smiling sweetly at Malfoy with a broad grin on her face.

Malfoy opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione held up a hand to stop him. "No, wait, don't answer that; you're just doing that and nothing else, aren't you? You know, one of the signs of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a *different* result each time..."

Malfoy just stared coldly at Hermione in frustration for a moment, and then groaned and turned to look back at the game. Glancing at the field, Hermione saw that Snape had just awarded a penalty to Hufflepuff because a bludger thrown by George had come too close to him, but otherwise nothing seemed to be particularly wrong.

And then, of course, Malfoy had to go and try to make a comment.

"You know how *I* think they pick people for the Gryffindor team?" he said, in his ever-superior drawl, as though he thought he was doing everyone a favour by acknowledging their existence and they should all automatically listen to whatever he had to say. "It's people they feel sorry for. See, there's the Weasleys, who've got no money, and then there's Potter, who-"

He then found himself with Hermione's wand in his face.

"If you even *think* about finishing that sentence," she said coldly, her eyes narrowed as she stared at the Slytherin on the other end of her wand, "*whatever* you were going to say, you'll soon find yourself with your legs stuck together. Got me?"

Malfoy sneered at Hermione, but he was evidently unwilling to talk back to someone pointing a wand at his nose, and just sat back down in his seat to sulk. Hermione smiled teasingly at him and then turned around to continue watching the game (Snape appeared to have just given Hufflepuff a penalty for no reason, but that aside it all seemed to be going fairly well...).

And then, just as Hermione heard a brief intake of breathe from behind her that sounded as though Malfoy was about to speak again, Harry made a spectacular dive to the ground.

“You’re in luck, Weas-” Malfoy began, only to have Ron and Hermione’s wands pointing in his face, cool, calculating expressions on their faces as they studied the three Slytherins behind them.

“In the words of Clank Westwood,” Ron said, staring harshly at Malfoy, trying to avoid turning around to look at the game behind him, “Now you have to ask yourself one question... Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya? *Punks?*”

Hermione shook her head slightly at Ron’s poor imitation- *he didn’t even get the name right*, she thought to herself in frustration- but she couldn’t argue with the results; Malfoy turning slightly pale as he studied the wands before him and sank back into his seat. Hermione just managed to turn back to the game before her when Harry hurtled up from the ground, one fist clenched before him and a wide grin on his face.

“We’ve won...” Neville whispered from beside Hermione; in all the bother of telling Malfoy to shut up, she’d barely managed to register the other Gryffindor’s presence. A part of her felt slightly guilty about that- Neville was rather poor in his subjects, but he was a decent enough person despite the fact that he constantly worried he was going to cause a major accident- but right now, she was too grateful that her brother was safe to focus on apologising.

Unfortunately, that still left them no further along in regards to working out what, exactly, Snape was up to, nor why he was waiting so long to actually try and get *at* the Stone...

As she and Ron headed down to the field to join Harry, Hermione was already going over what they knew already about the situation, trying to come up with an explanation for the fine details that were still confusing her; Snape's lack of activity at the match had made her realise, if they were ever going to crack this, they'd need to spend a bit more time thinking rather than just hope everything would be discovered at the right moment.

Thinking about it, Hermione supposed there might be some extra defences around the Stone that were stopping Snape from just going in and grabbing it- after all, big as he was, Fluffy alone was hardly going to stop someone who *really* wanted the Stone- so maybe Snape was trying to find out what those were?

Come to think of it, Hermione *had* seen him trying to question Quirrell once or twice; maybe that had something to do with it?

Great... she thought to herself, as she glanced over at what had to be the only Defence Against the Dark Arts professor in history who seemed to be terrified of his own shadow.

No offence on Quirrell, but if he was one of the things standing between Snape and the Stone, Hermione might very well see about moving schools; an immortal Snape was *not* something she wanted to have to deal with...

Chapter 15 – Norbert The Norwegian Ridgeback

As time went on, however, Hermione's fears about Snape finding out what he needed to know seemed to be groundless. She'd confided her concerns in Harry and Ron, of course, and they'd all done their best to keep an eye on the Potions master to ensure he didn't try anything, but so far their current avenue of investigation wasn't turning up anything helpful.

Of course, the fact that they were now so busy revising for exams- due in no small part to Hermione's insistence that they revise, of course- also wasn't helping them do any detective work in their spare time. Harry was perfectly happy to take a more leisurely approach to revision, checking over everything in smaller doses over the course of the year and looking at it completely in the last few days prior to the actual exams, but Hermione, for all Harry's attempts to make her calm down over the years, still went... well, 'kind of mad' when it came to exams, to say the least. Generally, Harry found that the easiest thing to do was leave her alone and assure her he was getting on with the revision as well, but Ron, his knowledge of Hermione limited to the last few months rather than the last few *years*, hadn't learned the wisdom of at least *pretending* to go along with her claims.

"*Hermione*," he groaned, as she tried to force one of her own carefully-planned-out revision timetables onto him in the common room one afternoon, "the exams are *ages* away..."

"Ten weeks?" Hermione retorted, looking critically at Ron as though she couldn't believe anybody could be such an idiot as to not take the exams more seriously. "For Nicholas Flamel, that's practically *seconds*."

"Hermione," Harry said in exasperation, peering at her over the copy of *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* that he was reading during one of his rare moments of leisure, "unlike Flamel, we're *not* old enough to remember when the Great Fire of London, the American Civil War and the bombing of Hiroshima; for us, ten weeks *is* a pretty decent amount of time to prepare for *anything*."

“*Why are you being so CASUAL about this?*” Hermione hissed over at her brother, barely remembering that there were other people in the room and she didn’t want to attract any attention. “You *know* that we’ve *got* to pass these if we want to stay here another year! I should have been revising ages ago, I don’t know *what’s* gotten into me-”

“If you’d started revising any *earlier*, Hermione, you’d have been revising since you *got* here,” Harry stated, placing the book off to the side and reaching out to grab Hermione’s wrists, staring at her in a manner that he hoped would make sure she listened to him. “Don’t you remember what I’ve told you in the past? If you just focus on your work and don’t give yourself a bit of time to have an actual *life*, you’ll end up giving yourself a heart attack by the time you’re twenty and pretty much ruining your social life with everybody you know, OK? So *chill. Out. Got me?*”

Looking back at her brother for a moment, Hermione looked like she was considering protesting, but, in the end, she just sighed and nodded, as Harry released her wrists.

“Yeah, I know you’re right...” she said, sighing slightly as she stared at her brother, a slightly awkward, embarrassed expression in her eyes. “I guess... it’s the new curriculum getting on top of me a bit, you know? At least when we were back at primary school we could always be sure that we knew the essential basics, if nothing else; these days, we’ve got to start *completely* over from scratch once again.”

Shaking his head ruefully, Harry grinned as he placed a reassuring hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it, sis; we’ll do fine,” he said, trying not to let his body reflect his slightly nagging doubts about his abilities in a couple of his classes- potions in particular was a problem; he somehow doubted that Snape would *want* to play fair when the time came to mark *his* work- and just seem relaxed about the whole thing.

In general, it wasn’t exactly a lie anyway; he *knew* that he could do this if he had the chance, he just needed to focus a bit and not get *too* stressed about the whole thing.

“Now then,” he said, grinning casually at Hermione as he sat back, “given that it took me *this* long to get you to calm down, you need to take some time out *soon*; OK?”

For a moment, Hermione still seemed prepared to protest, but, finally, she sighed and nodded.

“Yeah, OK,” she said, smiling apologetically at her brother and her friend before she glanced up at her room. “Now that I think about it, I *have* been meaning to check out that copy of *The Hobbit* that Mum gave me for Christmas this year...”

As Hermione headed up to the dormitories to fetch her book, Ron sighed in relief as he glanced over at Harry.

“*Thank you...*” he wheezed, relief evident in his eyes. “If she’d kept up with that, I really think I might have hit something...”

Harry shrugged. “Don’t blame you for that, really; I’ve felt that way myself once or twice,” he said casually, before leaning forward to glare at his friend. “Just so long as you understand that if you hit *Hermione* in a temper, no matter what your excuse is, I *will* hunt you down and *seriously* hurt you back, OK?”

For a moment, Ron looked uncertain as to whether Harry was being serious or not, but then he saw the look in his friend’s eyes and simply nodded.

“Good,” Harry said simply, as he leant back in his chair and continued to read his book.

Unfortunately, although Hermione was no longer quite as insistent about revising for the exams as she had been prior to Harry’s little lecture, the teachers as a whole appeared to have no qualms about giving the students an almost ridiculous amount of work. The homework they had over the Easter holidays took up so much time that those holidays weren’t nearly as fun as the Christmas ones had been, and, despite her best intentions, Hermione was commonly to be found reciting the twelve uses of dragon blood under her breath, with her hand unconsciously flicking as though she was waving her

wand whenever she was sitting still somewhere or other. However, much to Ron's relief, they didn't visit the library as often as they could have done; Harry had managed to talk Hermione down to just one or two weekly visits to research new information, allowing them time to relax and avoid practically burning their brains out.

It was on one of these visits, however, that two very unexpected things happened; one of them was that Ron noticed the second thing before either of the other two did. They'd just sat down for some Herbology revision- one of the few subjects where all three of them were on a pretty much equal level- when Ron suddenly said, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Looking up sharply at that, Harry and Hermione were surprised to see that Hagrid was indeed in the library; neither of them would have dreamed of mentioning it, but they'd always regarded Hagrid as being far from the most literate of people. Why would he be in a *library*?

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a slightly shifty voice; it was apparent that Hagrid would *never* be very good at spy work, even if he wasn't so distinctive. "What're you lot up ter?" His face suddenly looked more suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' for Nicholas Flamel, are ye?"

"Oh, we figured that out a while back," Ron said impressively. "*And* we know what-"

Before Ron could finish his sentence, however, Harry and Hermione had clapped their hands over his mouth, and were glaring at him critically.

"*Ron*," Hermione hissed, the gaze she directed at the boy so intense that Harry was surprised something didn't start burning, "do you have *no sense*? We can't go talking about something like *that* in *public*!"

As Ron nodded slightly, Hermione smiled slightly at him before she and Harry removed their hands as she turned back to look at Hagrid. "However, we wouldn't mind knowing a bit more about exactly what *else* is involved in the protection of the *you-know-what*, baring the obvious detail of a certain pet of yours..."

“SHHHH!” Hagrid said again, leaning over to speak to them more quietly as he anxiously glanced around the library. “Listen- come an’ see me later. I’m not promisin’ I’ll tell yeh anythin’, mind, but don’ go rabbitin’ about it in *here*, students *aren’ s’pposed ter know*. They’ll think I’ve told yeh -”

“Check; we’ll stay quiet in public and see you later, OK?” Harry said, grinning slightly at Hagrid.

As the gamekeeper shuffled off, however, Harry got up and walked over to the section that his friend had been studying, Ron and Hermione close behind him, although Ron looked a bit confused as to what this was all about.

“Uh... why are we doing this?” he asked, as Harry rounded the corner.

“I just want to know what section Hagrid was looking at,” Harry said, as he turned the corner to study the shelves. “If it turns out to have something...”

Then his eyes widened as he saw what was on the shelves.

“Oh, *nuts*,” he muttered to himself, as he looked back at Ron and Hermione. “It was the section on *dragons*.”

“*Dragons?*” Hermione said, looking over at Harry in shock. “As in, the dragons that Hagrid told us he’d always have liked to *own* when we first met him?”

“But it’s against our- sorry, wizard laws,” Ron said, noting Hermione’s glare; she had made it clear to Ron that he was to specifically refer to wizarding laws as such, rather than act as though they were somehow *different* from muggles, regarding it as an almost inverse of Malfoy’s typical behaviour. “Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlock’s Convention of 1709; everyone knows *that!*”

“Yeah, dragons aren’t exactly the kind of thing you can just hide in the garden shed when you want to keep them secret,” Harry said, as he stared in confusion at the door that Hagrid had just walked out of. “So what’s Hagrid up to, looking in the dragon section of the library...?”

When they went down to the gamekeeper's hut later that day, Harry's anxiety was just made worse by the fact that the curtains were closed and Hagrid actually asked who it was; neither fact boded well for any hopes that Hagrid might just have been checking the library out of idle interest.

As they entered the hut, Harry felt like he'd walked into a sauna; there was a blazing fire in the grate for some reason.

"So, Hagrid..." Hermione said, looking at their friend as she spoke in a flattering manner; she and Harry had discussed their approach upstairs, and it had been decided that Hermione was the best bet for trying to get through to Hagrid right now. "As far as the Philosopher's Stone goes, we were more wondering who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him protect it, apart from you; we understand *completely* that you can't tell us *what* they used, even if you *do* know everything that goes on around here."

Hagrid almost looked slightly sheepish at that last comment, but shrugged it off as he looked at Hermione, his initially fixed appearance of refusal slightly tempered by Hermione's flattering words.

"Well, I suppose it's all right for ye ter know *that*," he admitted, as he raised a few fingers as he went over the teachers in his mind. "Let's see, he borrowed Fluffy from me... then some o' the teachers did a few enchantments; Professor Sprout... Professor Flitwick... Professor McGonagall... Professor Quirrell... oh, and Dumbledore himself did something... there's one more... oh yeah; Professor Snape."

"*Sn-*" Ron began, but stopped when Harry kicked Ron lightly in the shin; there was no sense in reminding Hagrid of their earlier theories about Snape being after the stone, since it seemed pretty clear that the gamekeeper wouldn't believe them.

Still... based on Hermione's early sightings, it seemed pretty clear that Snape was putting a great deal of pressure on Quirrell to talk, for reasons that Hermione had yet to find out; if this was accurate, it seemed likely that Snape just didn't know what the Defence Against

the Dark Arts teacher had chosen as his own defence against the Stone.

“Uh... just to make sure, nobody knows how to get past Fluffy?” Harry asked, crossing his fingers slightly as he hoped that Hagrid wouldn’t notice Ron’s brief yelp of pain from where Harry had kicked him; the less suspicions they attracted, the better.

“Not a soul knows ‘cept me an’ Dumbledore,” Hagrid replied reassuringly.

“Well, that’s *something*...” Ron muttered over to Harry, shooting a briefly hostile look at his friend- probably for the kick- before he looked back at Hagrid. “Any chance you could open a window, by the way? Sorry, but I’m *boiling*...”

“Can’t, Ron; sorry,” Hagrid said...

And his eyes flicked towards the fire.

That was all Harry needed to see; glancing in the direction of the fire, Harry inwardly groaned at the sight of the large black egg in the centre of the blaze.

Unless Hagrid had some fondness for really, *really* big omelettes, there was only one explanation for *that* thing being there...

“Is that a *dragon egg*?” Hermione said, following her brother’s gaze and staring incredulously at the large black form before her. “Hagrid, it must have cost a *fortune*; how did you get it?”

“Well... I won it,” Hagrid said, looking slightly sheepishly at the three children as he spoke. “I was down in the village having’ a few drinks las’ night an’ got into a game o’ cards with a stranger; seemed glad ter get rid of it, really.”

“Uh... is this related to you being in the library earlier?” Harry asked, looking back at Hagrid. “We noticed you were in the dragon section...”

"Yeah, got this outta the library," Hagrid said, pulling a large book out from under his pillow; Harry noted that the title was *Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit*, suggesting to him that the book was more than *slightly* out of date if dragon breeding was outlawed.

"Bit outta date, but it's all in here," Hagrid explained, apparently not noticing the sceptical expressions of the others as he continued. "Fire's sp hot 'cause their mothers are meant ter breath on 'em in the nest, see, an' when it hatches, it needs a mix of brandy an' chicken wings every half hour. I've even worked out what kind of egg it is; it's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

The three students exchanged sceptical glances; even if none of them wanted to voice it directly, the fact that Hagrid lived in a *wooden* house and was prepared to raise a fire-breathing dragon was more than *slightly* worrying.

As soon as they could leave without causing offence, the three of them were standing outside the hut, exchanging anxious glances as they walked back to school.

"OK, with *that* bit of information in mind, does anyone have any idea how we *deal* with this *new* problem?" Harry asked, looking at Ron and Hermione. "I mean, we can't just *leave* Hagrid with a dragon; he could get in serious trouble if anyone finds out."

"Not forgetting the problem the thing burning his house and most of the forest down; I somehow doubt the fire thing is an exaggeration," Hermione said, sighing as she glanced back at the hut briefly. "If the size of the egg is any indication, the thing should be the size of a cat or dog when it hatches, and we have no idea how long it takes for these things to reach full size."

"Yeah..." Harry muttered to himself, before glancing back at Ron. "How fast do dragons *grow* in the first place?"

"Well, I don't know *exactly*, but I think it's pretty fast; I recall Charlie saying in one of his letters that he'd seen a dragon born in Easter and it was pretty much the size of a whole room in a month-"

Ron suddenly stopped talking as Harry and Hermione both stopped walking, staring at each other with an incredulous expression as they stared at each other.

“Oh my God...” Hermione whispered, as she stared incredulously at Harry. “We’re *idiots!*”

“Uh... excuse me?” Ron asked, looking in confusion between his two friends. “What is it?”

“Ron, you mentioned that your brother Charlie worked with dragons, right?” Harry said, as he looked back at his friend, a broad grin now on his face. “Do you think he’d be willing to take on a Norwegian Ridgeback if we asked him? I mean, if nothing else at least *he* might be better-equipped to deal with it *without* having a mass of legal problems dropped on his head because he’s doing something dangerous and potentially illegal if discovered...”

Ron nodded thoughtfully as Harry spoke, a small smile already forming on his face.

“It *could* work...” he said, as he looked at the two of them with a growing smile on his face. “Charlie said in one of his last letters that he works at a reserve; he’s definitely got the *space* to look after the thing, if nothing else.”

“But will Hagrid even *want* to let it go?” Hermione asked, as the three of them continued to walk up to the castle. “He *did* seem rather happy about having it...”

“If we tell him it’s Charlie, I’m sure he’ll understand,” Ron said, for once sounding more assured than he usually did when discussing a long-term strategy of some kind. “He’s made it pretty clear that the two of them got on well when Charlie was at school; if he’d trust anyone to look after the dragon, it’d be Charlie.”

“Well, here’s hoping,” Harry said, crossing his fingers in his pocket as the three of them approached the castle entrance.

It was a plan, at least, but Harry felt sure they should wait until the dragon was hatched before they suggested it to him; maybe *then*

he'd acknowledge that he couldn't quite handle the thing on his own...

The next couple of weeks were a mixed torment for Harry, Ron and Hermione, as they tried to both focus on their exams and work out a means of suggesting their idea about Charlie to Hagrid. Despite their resolution to avoid bringing up the Charlie suggestion until Hagrid had actually *seen* what it was like to raise a dragon, they were increasingly tempted to just take the easy way out and try it now...

But they knew that it wouldn't work; Hagrid was too besotted with the idea of owning an actual dragon to consider the consequences of such an action at the present. They had to give him a bit of time to get used to the idea of the *problems* involved...

Finally, at breakfast one day, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid, with only two words: *It's hatching*.

"Wicked!" Ron breathed, as he looked up at the others. "We've *got* to go; I mean, how often do-

"Ron, *sssh!*" Harry whispered, glancing around anxiously; Malfoy was listening far too intently from the Slytherin table for his liking, and the last thing they needed was for that *git* to find out what was up.

"Look," he continued in a low voice, "I think our best bet is to head down during break; nobody'll miss us and we should at least manage to get a look at the dragon, right? I'll grab the cloak and meet you in Herbology; see you in a minute."

As soon as Herbology was over (Harry only just managing to make it down to the lesson in time, his cloak concealed in his bag), the three of them hurried off to a shadowed area in one of the towers to get the cloak on over the three of them- it was a tight fit, but they managed it. Despite the necessary handicap of moving at a slow speed to avoid being seen, they made their way through the grounds to the edge of the forest as fast as they could. As soon as Harry had concealed the cloak back in his bag, they knocked on the door and Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited.

"*It's nearly out*," he said to them, grinning broadly, as though he could hardly believe what was happening in his hut, as he ushered them inside.

Staring around them, the three of them quickly noticed that the egg had been removed from the fire and was now lying on the table, with several deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside, and a funny clicking noise was coming from it. Drawing their chairs up to the table, the four people watched the sight before them with bated breath...

Then, all of a sudden, there was a scraping noise and the egg split open as the baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly as elegant as Harry had expected from some of the fantasy books he'd read when he first started living with the Grangers; it looked more like a crumpled, black umbrella than an elegant master of the skies. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

Staring around at its surroundings, the dragon sneezed and a couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he *beautiful*?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid, grinning at the dragon as though it had just tried to *grab* his finger rather than eat it. "Hello Norbert!"

"*Norbert*?" Ron said, looking incredulously at Hagrid and the dragon.

"Well, he's gotta have a name don't he?" Hagrid said, shrugging nonchalantly as he turned back to the dragon, reaching over to 'tickle' it slightly under the chin. "Don't you Norbert? Te de de de de!"

The newly-named Norbert 'sneezed' slightly, and Hagrid's beard suddenly had some faint flames in it. "Woah!" Hagrid said, chuckling slightly as he battered the flames out with his hands, sounding almost like a parent whose infant child had just had a slightly embarrassing toilet-related accident.

"He'll... have to be trained up a *bit*, o' course," he said, looking over at the students with a slightly sheepish smile.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, looking skeptically at the dragon in the gamekeeper's arms, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when his eyes fell on the window behind them, and he cocked his head to one side in a puzzled manner.

"What's the matter?" Ron asked.

"Think I saw someone coming down here through the gap in the curtains- looked like a kid..." Hagrid said, as he looked back at the others. "Yer didn' invite somebody else, did ye?"

"No..." Harry said, a slightly anxious expression on his face as inspiration dawned.

They hadn't *invited* anyone, but he was still sure that Malfoy had heard *something* this morning at breakfast...

"Hagrid," Harry said, glancing back at his friends and sister anxiously, "hide Norbert and get some cups out; make it look as though we just came down here for a meal or something."

"Harry, wha-" Hermione began.

"*Do it*," Harry hissed, as he sat back at the table. "I think Malfoy's coming down to see what we're up to, and I'm *not* going to let him see... Norbert!"

Nodding in understanding, Hagrid scooped Norbert up in his arms and carried him off to his bedroom, all the time whispering something to the dragon that sounded like he was apologizing to the creature.

As Harry and Hermione raced to get some of Hagrid's mugs, Ron organizing the chairs in the room so that one of them had a decent view of the window that Malfoy would have to peer through so they'd know if he was there, all three of them knew that the same thought was flying through their minds.

The sooner we can convince Hagrid to give the dragon up, the better.

Fortunately, the plan seemed to work; Ron never saw Malfoy at the window when he took his sneaking peaks in the right direction as they drank their tea, so it seemed as though their bluff had paid off. However, not wanting to tempt fate, they left Hagrid's hut after they'd finished their food, noting with satisfaction that there was no sign of the Slytherin anywhere.

While Malfoy's continued glares in their direction over the next week or so made it clear that he was still sure they were up to *something*, he evidently didn't have anything to go to a teacher with.

However, neither Harry, Hermione or Ron paid him much attention; they had spent most of their free time in Hagrid's darkened hut, trying to work out the best way to suggest that Hagrid give Norbert to Charlie to look after.

"Look, Hagrid," Harry said one day, having decided that the best approach was the direct one, "I get that you're excited about Norbert, but at the rate he's growing, it'll only be two weeks before he'll end up being as long as your house; there's no *way* you can keep him secret *then*."

It wasn't exactly the *best* way to say it, but nobody could deny that it was accurate; Norbert had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of his nostrils in a very worrying manner that made it look as though it was prepared to fry the first person who looked at it wrongly, and Hagrid hadn't been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

Hagrid bit his lip, looked tearfully at Norbert for a moment, and then sighed and looked back at Harry.

"I- I *know* I can't keep him forever..." he said, looking regretfully between the dragon and the boy before him, "but I can't jus' dump him... I *can't*."

"Well, we *do* have an alternative," Hermione said, raising her hand politely as she looked at Hagrid, a small smile on her face. "You remember Charlie Weasley, right?"

"Yeah..." Hagrid said, looking at Hermione inquiringly, as though wondering where this was going.

"Well," Ron said, taking up the story, "we thought that, since Charlie works on a dragon preserve these days, we could ask *him* if he could take care of Norbert instead? You know, just until Norbert's ready to go back into the wild?"

"Well..." Hagrid said, studying Norbert for a moment, an almost wistful expression on his face, before he sighed and turned back to look at the group. "OK, yer can give it a try, at least; at least Charlie'd know how to treat Norbert properly."

The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. For reasons none of them were sure about, they'd somehow been persuaded to help Hagrid feed Norbert at the end of the day- with the dragon currently eating dead rats by the crate, it was too much for one man to do alone- and Ron was currently taking the evening 'shift', leaving them to wait for him.

The clock on the wall had just chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open, Ron appearing out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's invisibility cloak.

"It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief and already seemed to be swelling up. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit!"

"Well, he *has* wanted one for ages; I suppose it's only natural he's a bit... biased in its favor, really," Harry said, trying to convince Ron to see things from Hagrid's point of view. "And it's not like he's *that* bad..."

"*Not that bad?*" Ron said, looking at his friend incredulously. "When it bit me, he told *me* off for *frightening* it, and when I left, he was singing it a bloody *lullaby*! I'd call that a *bit* more than a *bit* biased-!"

A tap on the darkened window fortunately ended the argument for the present moment.

"It's Hedwig!" said Harry, hurrying to let her in. "She'll have Charlie's answer!"

The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter -- I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon. Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another, all three of them already calculating how they were going to pull this off without getting caught. The tallest tower was easily accessible, of course- the astronomy tower was the clear choice on *that* front- but what about actually getting Norbert *up* there?

"We've got the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It shouldn't be too difficult- I think the cloaks big enough to cover two of us and Norbert."

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert- and stop Malfoy's attempts to find out just *what* was in Hagrid's hut that nobody else was meant to see.

Of course, as always, Sod's Law (Or Murphy's Law; Harry was never sure which was the correct term- came into play; by the next morning, Ron's bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn't know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey- would she recognize a dragon bite?- but he had no choice by the afternoon. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green that made it look as though Norbert's fangs were poisonous; he *had* to get it properly examined.

Harry and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

"I can't *do* this!" he hissed, looking up at the two of them as he indicated his hand. "The thing feels like it's about to drop off, and Malfoy saw me as I was coming in- I stumbled in the corridor while he was passing and the bandage fell off- I'm *sure* he knows what it is that did this, his bloody family'll probably keep themselves up-to-date with *everything* that might hurt somebody..."

"Look, just calm down; it'll all be over at midnight on Saturday," Hermione began, but this only prompted Ron to sit bolt upright and break into a sweat.

"Midnight on Saturday!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Oh no oh no- I've just remembered- Charlie's letter was in my bag when I was walking- I haven't had a chance to get rid of it- but I stumbled in the corridor when I was passing Malfoy and it wasn't there afterwards! If *he's* got it, he's *going to know we're getting rid of Norbert!*"

Harry and Hermione didn't get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

"It's too late to change the plan now," Harry told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it."

"Yes, I know..." Hermione said, sighing slightly before a small smile crossed her face. "On the bright side, we *have* got the invisibility cloak; we know for a fact that Malfoy doesn't know about *that*."

When they went to tell Hagrid about the letter, neither were entirely surprised to find Fang sitting outside with a bandaged tail; Norbert had been getting increasingly aggressive during their past visits. Even when they tried to talk to Hagrid, he only opened a window to talk to them, claiming that Norbert was at 'a tricky stage'- and Harry did *not* want to know what else that would involve, if his hunch was correct. Hagrid's eyes filled with tears when he heard about the letter, although Harry thought that it could have been Norbert biting him on the leg somewhere; despite Hagrid's constant claims that Norbert was only a baby playing, Harry still felt that an actual 'baby' shouldn't be able to make the windows of an entire house rattle just by banging its tail.

As far as they were concerned, Saturday night couldn't come soon enough.

They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do; Harry had no desire to lose points after doing so much to help Gryffindor *gain* the House Cup. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall with a pan and various eggs (Fortunately it was only conventional eggs. Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate.

"He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice, a handkerchief clutched over his mouth and nose. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as though the teddy was having his head torn off.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mummy will never forget you!"

Looking back, Harry would never be certain how he and Hermione managed to get the crate back to the castle; the cloak didn't stop noise, as far as he knew, and Norbert refused to stop making some

kind of racket no matter how hard they tried to make him stay quiet. As they heaved Norbert through the silent halls of Hogwarts towards the astronomy tower, climbing countless stairs as they did so, Harry still couldn't believe that they'd managed to get this far *without* running into somebody...

Then he spotted a sudden movement in front of them. Instinctively, the two of them pressed themselves up against the wall as well as they could, hoping that whoever it was wouldn't pass so close to the wall that they felt the cloak.

Then he saw who it was, and he felt like smiling so widely that his head could have split in half; Professor McGonagall, in a tartan dressing-gown and a hair-net, was holding Malfoy's ear and yelling at him.

"Detention!" she should. "And fifty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how *dare* you-"

"Professor, you don't understand, I think Ron Weasley's trying to get a *dragon* up here-"

"What utter rubbish! How *dare* you tell such lies? I shall see Professor Snape about you..."

As the voices died down behind them, Harry and Hermione looked at each other with a broad grin on their faces.

"Malfoy's got *detention*!" Hermione breathed, as though she almost couldn't believe it; after all the times Snape had ignored Malfoy's attempts to sabotage their potions in class, she'd been wondering if he would *ever* get in trouble. "I could *sing*!"

"Please don't," Harry whispered, shaking his head warningly. "Putting aside the fact that it would give us away, no matter *how* hard you try, you're still *totally* tone-deaf with it comes to anything that *isn't* 'Happy Birthday'."

Hermione just rolled her eyes slightly at that comment- she always resented it when Harry reminded her of her relatively nonexistent musical abilities- but picked up the crate and continued to walk up the

tower, trying not to get too jolted by Norbert thrashing around in his crate. As they reached the top, Harry glanced at his watch and smiled with relief; they still had about ten minutes to spare before Charlie's friends showed up.

As promised, the four of them arrived at the top of the tower right at midnight to collect their charge—a quartet of wizards with a jerry-rigged harness running between their brooms to carry the crate. They seemed awfully cheerful to Harry, given that what they were doing was highly illegal, but he supposed, no matter what age you were at the time, people always tended to enjoy bending the rules now and again. In a matter of moments, the crate was hooked up to the harness between the brooms and the four of them were flying off into the night sky, taking the dragon out of their lives forever...

"Thank *God*," Hermione said, glancing over at Harry as the brooms finally vanished. "Let's just get *out* of here."

She moved to head towards the stairs, but Harry grabbed her wrist.

"Aren't you forgetting this?" he asked, indicating the invisibility cloak that he'd thrown off to the side when they'd arrived at the top of the tower; he hadn't wanted to attract any questions about it. "Just because Malfoy's out of the picture doesn't mean there might not be *somebody* down there."

"Oh... right... sorry," Hermione said, chuckling sheepishly as Harry shrugged the cloak on over the two of them.

"*Honestly*," Harry said, taking care to keep his voice low as they walked back down the stairs. "You're meant to be the *smarter* one, Hermione; if it was up to you, we'd have just *left* the cloak behind..."

Underneath the cloak, Hermione glared briefly at her brother, but, that aside, remained focused on the matter at hand; getting back to Gryffindor Tower without being seen. There was a close call with Filch as they neared the bottom of the stairs- he'd been walking by and looked back as though he'd heard something- but, when nobody came down, he appeared to dismiss it as nothing and went back to walking along the corridor, leaving Harry and Hermione to hurry back to the tower in relative peace.

AN: Sorry if anyone wanted to see the scene in the Forbidden Forest; I felt that, given that Harry is a *bit* smarter- and hence, a bit more thorough- in this timeline, he *wouldn't* be such an idiot as to forget the cloak at the top of the tower. So, there won't be a meeting with the centaurs, but trust me, Harry *will* suspect that something's wrong, using the deductive skills he's developed from reading all those Holmes stories in his spare time...

Chapter 16 – Deductions of a Stone-Related Nature

With Norbert out of their lives at last, Harry, Hermione and Ron were finally able to turn their attention back to more conventional problems; specifically, the upcoming exams and revising for them in a manner that *wouldn't* cause them to suffer heart attacks when they were in their twenties from the sheer stress of it.

Of course, they did have their occasional moment of pleasure, particularly from seeing Malfoy's expression at breakfast the next morning. Not only was he staring at them as though he'd just swallowed something terrible and was trying to figure out what the hell had just happened, but practically the whole of Slytherin was shunning him, evidently knowing well that it was his fault alone that they had suddenly lost twenty points the last night.

Ron, of course, was ecstatic about it when he got out of the hospital wing a few days later and heard the fully story of what had happened that night. Harry and Hermione were both grateful that they'd waited until they were alone in their part of the common room during one of Gryffindor's unofficial 'revision periods'; given that making too much noise wouldn't make Ron the most popular of people, he was unlikely to attract all that much attention to himself.

"*Brilliant!*" he said, grinning broadly at them as soon as they had finished recounting the events of that night to him. "You mean *Malfoy* got caught trying to catch *you*? And they've got *no idea* he was actually telling the *truth* for once?"

"Yep," Harry said, smiling over at his friend as he glanced up from the book he was reading at the moment. Alan had recently sent him, as a belated Christmas present, a rather intriguing Holmes-based book written by a man called Loren D Estleman, featuring Holmes going up against Count Dracula, and he was currently half-way through the novel. He'd taken to reading it during his leisure time, as he did most of the books he'd brought with him to Hogwarts, and currently the two of them were taking time out from their revision while Hermione looked for a certain book. "Of course, it was still pretty close, but with the cloak, it was a piece of proverbial cake to get out of there really."

He paused for a moment as he read the page in front of him, and then sighed slightly as he placed his bookmark in and placed the book on the table in front of him.

“Problem?” Ron asked, looking curiously at his friend.

“Yeah...” Harry said, sighing as he looked back at Ron. “I sometimes wish I knew what was *missing* from this picture we’ve put together. I mean, I get that Snape seems to be after the Philosopher’s Stone, we know that Hagrid’s pet Cerberus is the only thing that he *doesn’t* seem to know how to get past, we know that Snape seems to be having some kind of trouble with Quirrell, we know which other teachers were involved in setting up the protection for the Stone...”

Groaning, he raised one hand to rub at his scar, which had recently started to throb slightly at irregular intervals. He didn’t think it was anything serious, of course- as long as he could remember the scar had become more like a birthmark than an actual *injury* in his mind- but it was still rather annoying.

“I just can’t escape the feeling that there’s something about this whole puzzle that we *haven’t* managed to figure out yet,” he said, as he looked back at Ron and Hermione. “I mean, why would Snape want to steal the Stone? If he wants to be rich, there’s got to be easier ways of making money than going through all the defences the Stone must have around it, and why would he want immortality?”

Ron look at Harry like his friend had grown an extra head, but, before he could say anything, Hermione had jumped in with a sharp glare in Ron’s direction.

“Face facts, Ron,” she said, as she glared critically at her friend, “Snape doesn’t seem to have anything *wrong* with his health, he’s shown no real desire for the *power* you might get from being immortal- he may like belittling us in class, but that’s just simple vindictiveness rather than actual desire to be in *charge* as far as I can see- and as for money... well, Harry said it best; there’s got to be easier ways to make it than trying to go through all the traps between Fluffy and the entrance.”

For a brief time, it looked as though Ron was going to object to his friends' thoughts, but, as soon as he'd opened his mouth, he stopped, seemed to spend a few seconds in thought, and then nodded slowly.

"It... *does* fit..." he said, looking at Harry and Hermione with no small degree of admiration. "How'd you two get that good at figuring people out?"

Harry smiled nonchalantly at his friend.

"I've read too many murder mysteries for my own good," he said by way of explanation, as he indicated the book he still held in his hands. "It left me with a good mind for cracking mysteries."

"Well, you're good when you put your mind to it and they give you a few *clues*," Hermione said, grinning over at Harry teasingly. "I mean, you're good when it comes to working out whodunit in Sherlock Holmes cases, but what about those Christie novels? Gives you more of a problem *then*, doesn't it?"

"Who?" Ron said, looking in confusion between his friends.

"Never mind," Harry said, shrugging it off casually as he turned back to his book, before he sighed and put it off to the side, reaching up to rub at his scar once again as he looked back at his friends. "You know, we've been cooped up in here too long; I'm going off for a quick walk. Anyone want to join me?"

Ron moved to get up, but Hermione grabbed his hand and shook her head warningly at him before she looked over at Harry.

"Sorry, Harry, but *one* of us has to make sure *this* boy actually gets *some* work done," she said, looking critically at Ron. "You know, you can't just skip work because you're bored; after all that time you spent in the hospital wing, you're *significantly* behind the rest of us!"

"C'mon, 'Mione, couldn't you just...?" Ron said, looking pleadingly at his friend.

“No,” Hermione stated simply, glaring in a fixed manner at Ron. “You’re far enough behind as it is; you’re doing some work, right here, right now, and that is *final*.”

Harry knew that look well enough; when Hermione was using it, nothing and nobody could make her change her mind.

“Sorry, Ron,” he said, shrugging in an apologetic manner as he grinned at his friend. “You can’t argue with Hermione when she’s like this; trust me, I’ve tried.”

“But... but...” Ron protested, staring pleadingly at his friend.

“Sorry, but you’re on your own here,” Harry said apologetically, shrugging as he turned to walk towards the portrait hole, grinning slightly as he heard Ron continue to protest as Hermione started talking to him. He knew that it was a bit unfair on Ron, leaving him alone to deal with Hermione like that, but Harry had to be cruel to be kind; if Ron was ever going to pass this year, he’d need to do some serious catch-up work, and Hermione was the best candidate to do that. He may have been just as attentive to his work as his sister, but he couldn’t deny that Hermione was better at getting people motivated.

After all, she’d encouraged *him* to work harder when they’d first met; at the time, he was still trying to get over his fears that he’d get beaten up if he was *too* good at the work. He’d known that the Grangers wouldn’t actually hit him, of course, but some instinctive habits were hard to break, even if they hadn’t had that much time to develop. He was always grateful that both his parents and sister had managed to get through to him on that front; it had taken a few months after the adoption, but he’d eventually reached a state where he could sometimes surpass *Hermione* at times.

Harry was so caught up in his reminiscing about his and Hermione’s early days as a family that he walked around a corner and practically crashed into the large form of Hagrid as the gamekeeper came around the corner.

“Harry?” Hagrid said, looking at the young wizard in concern as he crouched down to help the young student up. “Are yer OK?”

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry said, looking up at his friend with an apologetic smile. "Sorry; I should have watched where I was going."

Then he frowned as he stared at the gamekeeper, a thought occurring to him; in the last few months, he'd never seen Hagrid *inside* Hogwarts except for meal-times at the staff table and that occasion when he'd been looking for that dragon book in the library.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his expression changing to confusion. "Is everything... well, OK?"

"Eh... not quite, Harry," Hagrid said, looking at the young student with a saddened expression in his eyes. "I was jus' checkin' the outskirts o' the forest, an' discovered a dead unicorn lyin' out there."

"A dead *unicorn*?" Harry said, his eyes wide as he took in what Hagrid had just told him. "There are *unicorns* out there? I... well, I guess I always thought they"

"Oh yeah; beautiful things," Hagrid said, smiling briefly at Harry before he sighed, his expression becoming melancholy once again. "Thought I saw traces of blood leadin' away from the body; think there's something out there that's attackin' the unicorns fer some reason. I need ter ask Dumbledore if there's any way I could get some help in checkin' ter see if there's somethin' in there we should be worried about; don't want something that'd kill unicorns walking about on its own."

"Why?" Harry asked, looking at Hagrid inquiringly. "I mean, maybe it's just a wild animal or something..."

Hagrid shook his head.

"Nah, couldn't be; wounds were too neat," he explained. "I know what's in that forest better than most, and if they got it inter themselves ter attack a unicorn, it wouldn't be at the edge, and it'd be in a *lot* worse shape. This 'un..."

He sighed, as he looked at Harry. "If I didn' know better, I'd think a *human* had killed it. All that blood..."

“Blood?” Harry began to say, before Hagrid’s eyes widened, as though he couldn’t believe what he’d just been saying.

“I shouldn’ta told yer that!” he said, looking as though he wished he could beat himself up for what he’d just told Harry. “Ferget I ever said anything! Hey- where’re yeh going?”

Harry didn’t stop to answer his friend; he just tore through the corridors as fast as he dared without actually risking running into things, his eyes narrowed in a determined manner as he headed for the library. During a dull lunch period when they’d been revising potion ingredients, he’d looked up why unicorn hair and horns were such useful ingredients (Something about them being powerful light magic creatures) but there’d been something about the use of unicorn *blood* that he couldn’t quite remember.

It hadn’t been much- it had been mainly discouraging people from using it, now that he thought about it- but maybe if he looked in the library, he’d manage to find out more...

As soon as he’d reached the library, he hurried over to the shelf where he’d last seen the book as fast as he dared- he didn’t want to anger Madam Pince by making too much noise- pulled the book off its shelf, taken it to a desk, and opened it at the place he’d seen the information in question.

“Oh no...” he muttered to himself, as his eyes took in what was written before him with ever-growing dread.

“Unicorn blood itself has remarkable powers, enabling the drinker to remain alive regardless of their own state at the time of drinking. However, given the incredible purity of unicorns, this action would leave the drinker cursed due to the utter selfishness of what they have done; for no reason other than for themselves, they have slain a pure, innocent creature for their own ends, and they will live a cursed life from the moment they drink the blood. For this reason alone, the use of unicorn blood for any purpose carries an instant penalty of imprisonment-”

Harry didn’t bother to read any more; he already knew what he’d come to the library to find out.

If just drinking unicorn blood could have *those* kind of consequences- eternal punishment, life imprisonment- then it seemed unlikely that the unicorns Hagrid had found dead had been killed for their blood, but, given that Hagrid hadn't mentioned anything *else* missing from the bodies, blood seemed like the most likely motive for the murders.

Of course, the part about being cursed forever was a problem, but given that the Philosopher's Stone- an item capable of conferring *eternal life* on the user- was currently beneath Hogwarts, and these deaths had occurred not too far away, Harry was prepared to bet his broomstick that the unicorn blood was just being used until the killer could acquire the Stone.

But who could be that desperate to stay alive? Harry asked himself, staring in shock at the information. *It can't be Snape; that git may be a pain in the neck, but he's as healthy as you could want...*

Then, in a wave of horror, it hit Harry.

The words Hagrid had said when he'd first come to tell him and Hermione about their magical powers, when Harry had asked for further details about the night his parents had died.

"Some say he died; codswallop, in my opinion. Don't know if he had enough human left in him ter die..."

"Oh my God..." Harry whispered to himself, looking up from the book, his eyes widening in horror as he took in what he'd just realised. "It's *him*... it's *got* to be..."

Just when he thought the situation was as bad as it could get, it just became worse.

When Harry got back to the common room, he was only partially surprised to see that Ron and Hermione were still working at the same table they'd been at when he'd left them. Whenever Harry tried to get Ron to study, his friend would have, by this point in time, tried to get out of studying and have to be forced back down into a different chair at least once by now, but Hermione always seemed to be able to convince Ron to actually *focus* more on his work. Harry

had never been able to quite work out *how* his sister could be such a better influence on Ron, and, right now, he didn't care.

They had a *serious* problem on their hands.

As soon as they'd heard the portrait hole open, Ron and Hermione had glanced around to see who it was, both of them smiling when they saw who it was (Albeit for different reasons; Hermione was glad to see her brother back and Ron was grateful for any opportunity to take a break from studying).

A part of Harry almost hated to do or say anything that would stop his friend and the girl who was his sister in every way that counted smiling.

But, right now, if he didn't tell them about the problem *now*, there may never be an excuse for them to smile in the future.

"I know why Snape's after the Stone," he said, looking at the two of them, his fear evident in his eyes as he looked at his friends, desperately beckoning them over to a corner of the room so they couldn't be overheard.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, looking at her brother, noting the fearful expression on his face; it was clear that, whatever Harry had discovered it was *nothing* but bad news.

"It's Voldemort," Harry said simply. "He wants it to bring Voldemort back."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock; Ron, on the other hand, just looked terrified at the very *name* Harry had just said.

"*What?*" Hermione said, staring at her brother with wide, horrified eyes.

Ever since they'd discovered the truth about how Harry's parents had died, Voldemort had been the one subject of the wizarding world they'd never really discussed between the two of them, preferring to leave it in the past. If nothing else, the subject of Harry's 'real' family

was always an uncomfortable one for Hermione; on some level, she always worried that Harry wouldn't think of her as his *sister* if he knew too much about his birth parents.

It was a foolish fear, she knew, but that was just how she felt at times.

But if the man who'd actually *killed* Harry's parents was involved in this...

Hermione's own feelings on the matter aside, if Voldemort was here and Harry wanted to face him, she was resolved that her brother wouldn't have to fight him alone.

"But... but how can it be *Voldemort*?" she continued, ignoring the look on Ron's face that made him seem as though he was trying to keep from screaming in horror at the name they'd just said. "Hagrid told us he was dead!"

"No, Hagrid said that *some* people thought he was dead; Hagrid thought that Voldemort wasn't human enough to die," Harry explained, giving Ron an exasperated glance before he continued to talk, trying to ignore his friend's ridiculously terrified expression at the reference to Voldemort (As far as names went, Harry personally thought that he'd heard scarier names in comics- 'Abattoir' alone had sounded more vicious. Besides, when you got down to it, what was actually *scary* about a *name*?). "Look, I know it's a bit of a stretch, but when I was out walking I ran into Hagrid, and he told me that he's found a couple of dead unicorns lately, with a heavy emphasis being put on the amount of *blood* that was left at the 'crime scenes'."

"So?" Ron put in, looking at Harry with a puzzled expression that seemed to be also verging on total panic, most likely just at the *thought* that somebody with Voldemort's evidently terrifying reputation was active in the school.

"Well, I took a look in the library," Harry explained, briefly rolling his eyes at Ron's stunned expression- the library wasn't *that* hard to find stuff in if you were actually *trying* to look for something- before he continued speaking, "and found a book that revealed that unicorn blood is only useful for one thing; keeping the user alive, no matter *what* kind of state they're in, but at the cost of cursing them because

they'd killed a pure creature like a unicorn for no other reason than to help themselves. It just seemed to me that nobody would do something like that unless they were already so weak that they just needed unicorn blood to give them enough strength to get at something *more* potent- such as, of course, the *Stone*- and it just struck me; who else would be that *desperate* to stay alive?"

"You mean... Voldemort?" Hermione whispered softly, staring at her brother with wide, horrified eyes as she took in what he'd just told them.

"*Don't say his name!*" Ron hissed anxiously at them, looking around as though he was afraid the man in question was going to pop up out of thin air just at the mention of his name.

"*Ron,*" Harry groaned, glancing over at his friend, "the man who's meant to be the most powerful Dark Lord for the last three hundred years may be in this school trying to get at the Philosopher's Stone, and you're worrying about a stupid *name*? It's not like he's going to appear out of thin air just by *saying* it, you know!"

"B-but..." Ron began, before he noticed the identical exasperated glares Harry and Hermione were shooting in his direction and wisely decided it would be best if he just stayed silent.

Shooting Ron yet another exasperated glare, making it clear that, as far as he was concerned, his friend needed to grow up and get over such an idiotic fear, Harry turned to look at Hermione.

"Anyway," he said, looking at his sister in a slightly anxious manner, "you've heard my theory; do you think it works?"

For a moment, Hermione just stood there in silence, turning over what Harry had just said in her mind, before she finally nodded, slow, deliberate nods as she looked back at her two friends.

"It *does* fit with what we've got so far..." she said, looking approvingly at her brother as she continued speaking. "After all, we've been stuck with figuring out Snape's *motive* in going after the Stone from the beginning; if he's doing it for Voldemort, everything makes a *lot* more sense..."

“Pretty much what I was thinking,” Harry said, before he sighed and looked over at the rest of Gryffindor House, all of whom were sitting around in the common in various stages of either revision or leisure activities. “Too bad we can’t actually *tell* anybody...”

“*What?*” Ron said, looking incredulously at Harry. “Are you *crazy*? If You-Know-Who’s-”

“Firstly, his name is *Voldemort*- it’s dumb, I know, but saying it’s a lot less stupid than saying ‘You-Know-Who’ all the time- and secondly, what kind of *proof* have we got that Snape’s actually doing *anything*?” Harry pointed out, glaring critically over at Ron. “Quirrell’s the only other ‘witness’ to the fact that Snape seems to be trying *anything*, and he’s too scared to back us up if we went to Dumbledore. Besides, it’s hardly a secret that we all *hate* Snape- they’ll just assume we’ve made all this up to get him sacked- and how would we explain knowing about the Stone and Fluffy without getting Hagrid in trouble?”

Hermione sighed.

“Good points, Harry,” she said, as she looked over at Ron to place a hand on his shoulder. “Trust me, Ron; I wish we could tell someone as much as you do, but we don’t have so much as a *scrap* of proof that we haven’t just concocted an elaborate story to get Snape in trouble.”

She sighed again as she glanced over at her brother, an anxious expression on her face as she looked at him. “I guess all we can do is keep an ear out in case something else comes up, huh?”

“Yeah...” Harry said, looking back at the other Gryffindors as they studied, a wistful expression on his face.

He had never before wished more strongly that he could have an *easier* life than he did...

Over the next few weeks, despite his occasional fears that Voldemort was going to come charging into the classroom to try and kill him and/or Hermione at any moment, Harry forced himself to concentrate

on his written and practical exams. Despite the stifling heat in the classrooms where they had to sit the written papers, Harry generally thought he managed to retain his focus well enough, getting several decent lengths of parchment out of his assigned topics before the exams were over.

The practical exams, though, were definitely more fun than he'd ever expected to have doing schoolwork back in the old days. Flitwick's exam in particular- making a pineapple tap-dance along the desk- was rather amusing once you remembered how to do it, although the Transfiguration test of turning a mouse into a snuff-box could get rather repetitive after a while.

Fortunately, Harry wasn't as concerned by the Voldemort issue as he might have expected. Maybe it was Hermione's influence, encouraging him to stay calm almost without even trying- something she seemed to have picked up over the years with him, particularly those few months after the adoption where a part of him remained worried about being attacked by the Dursleys- but he found it rather easy to forget about the problem of Voldemort's presence and focus on his exams.

Finally, after several days of exam work, Harry and his friends finished their last exam- History of Magic, which, as always, missed out anything interesting in wizarding history to focus on questions that could have been used as a cure for insomnia if you were *really* desperate- and walked out into the sunshine, smiling in relief at the thought of the next week or so of freedom.

"Thank GOD..." Hermione said, smiling as she glanced over at her brother. "I know I enjoy work and all, but you reach a point where you just can't *take* any more..."

Ron snorted slightly, as though he was about to start laughing at the idea of Hermione *not* being interested in work, but a brief glare from Harry stopped him.

Turning back to look at the fields before him, Harry sighed as he rubbed at his scar while walking.

He couldn't explain exactly *what* it was, but, ever since he'd had his revelation about Voldemort, he'd been unable to shake the nagging feeling that he was missing something about this whole situation. Oh, everything about why Snape was after the Stone and why Voldemort had to be behind it made sense, but there was something else that didn't fit... something that didn't *seem* to be connected at first but was *definitely* important...

Then it hit Harry.

"Of *course*..." he muttered to himself, as he rapidly changed direction to head towards Hagrid's hut, only just registering that Ron and Hermione were following him.

"What is it?" Ron asked, looking in confusion at his friend.

"The last piece of the puzzle just hit me," Harry explained, as he glanced back at Ron. "It had been bothering me for a while, but I couldn't see it because it didn't seem to be connected."

"*What* didn't seem to be connected?" Hermione asked.

"Don't you think it's just a *bit* odd," Harry continued, as they got ever closer to the hut, "that what Hagrid want more than anything is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just *happens* to have one?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she realised what Harry had just said.

"God, we're *idiots*!" she yelled, staring at her brother in exasperation. "I mean, how many people wander around with dragon eggs in their pockets when it's against the law?"

"Exactly," Harry said, as he continued on, Ron and Hermione close behind him.

Hagrid was sitting outside the hut when they arrived there, his sleeves rolled up as he shelled peas into a pod.

"Hullo," he said, smiling as he looked up at them. "Finished yer exams, have yeh?"

"Yeah, we did, thanks," Harry replied, trying to be as polite as he could. "Hagrid, who gave you that dragon egg? What did he look like?"

"Dunno," Hagrid said casually. "Never saw his face; he kept his hood up."

Harry blinked in surprise at Hagrid's apparently nonchalant attitude to that, but Hermione beat him to his next question before he could think of what to say next.

"This stranger, though..." she said, looking uncertainly at their friend, as though reluctant to risk Hagrid's friendship by going too far, but knowing that she had to ask it, "you and he must have talked, right?"

"Well, he wanted to know what sort of creatures I looked after," Hagrid said, shrugging nonchalantly, as though he wasn't discussing anything important- which, admittedly, he probably assumed he wasn't. "And I told him, after Fluffy a dragon's gonna be no problem..."

"And... did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, a part of him praying Hagrid would answer in the negative even as the rest of him knew he wouldn't.

"Well, of course he was interested in Fluffy!" Hagrid said, chuckling as though the idea of somebody *not* being interested in Fluffy was absurd. "How often do you come across three headed dogs do you come across even if you're in the trade? But I told him, I said, I said, "The trick with any beast is to know how to calm him." Take Fluffy for example, just play him a bit of music and he falls straight asleep-"

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Hagrid looked horrified with himself.

"I shouldn't have told you that!" he blurted out. "Ferget I said anything! Wait- where're ye going? Where're ye-?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione didn't speak to each other at all as they hurried back to the castle, focusing all their energy on getting back to

the common room, where they instantly hurried over to a quiet corner where they could talk without anybody overhearing them (Admittedly, that wasn't hard, given that *nobody* was inside at the moment, but they still preferred to be out of range of anybody who might enter while they were talking).

"Great," Harry muttered, as he glanced between his friends. "So much for any hopes that Fluffy will be a problem; whoever's behind this has known how to get past *that* obstacle since around *Christmas...*"

"But... there's still *Quirrell's* spell, right?" Ron put in, looking anxiously at Harry. "Maybe that'll be enough..."

"Ron," Hermione said, shooting an exasperated glare at her friend, "firstly, we have no way of knowing that Quirrell hasn't given in already- the man may be a teacher, but he's such a wreck that he could have stopped trying to resist Snape *months* ago and we wouldn't have noticed- and secondly, we're dealing with *Voldemort* here, remember? I somehow doubt anything *Quirrell's* come up with could pose a long-term problem to the man who terrorized Britain for the better part of a *decade!*"

"Right then," Harry said, as he nodded in quiet resolution, "there's no other option; we'll have to go to Dumbledore." Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Harry raised a hand to stop him. "I *know* we still don't have any evidence, but it's all we've got right now, OK? If Voldemort knows how to get past Fluffy- and most likely knows what all the other 'traps' are to protect the stone- we *have* to tell somebody."

"Right," Hermione said, indicating the door of the common room. "Let's go; the sooner the better."

However, no sooner had the three of them stepped out of the common room and begun to head down a corridor, a voice suddenly rang out from behind them.

"What are the three of you doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a pile of books.

“Oh, professor...” Hermione sighed in relief as she turned to look at the deputy headmistress. “We have to see Professor Dumbledore immediately!”

McGonagall looked at the three of them in slight surprise at that, as though surprised that any first year students should need to see the headmaster for no apparent reason.

“I’m afraid Professor Dumbledore’s not here,” she said simply. “He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and left immediately for London.”

“He’s *gone*?” Ron said, staring at her in horror. “But this is important!”

“Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Mr Weasley?”

“Look,” Harry said, concluding that the direct approach was their only hope right now, “this is about the Philosopher’s Stone!”

Harry was grateful to note that this, at least, had the effect he’d been hoping for; McGonagall’s eyes widened in shock and she nearly dropped the books she was holding.

“How did you know-?” she began.

“Someone’s going to try to steal it!

For a moment, McGonagall eyed him with shock and suspicion, and then seemed to make up her mind as her face became neutral once again.

“I don’t know how you three found out about the Stone,” she said, looking at them with an expression that made it clear she still thought they were only wasting her time, “but I assure you it is perfectly well protected. Now would you go back to the common room?”

Exchanging concerned glances as they realised that McGonagall clearly *wasn’t* going to listen to their warnings right now, the three of them turned around and walked back into the common room,

slumping dejectedly down into three empty chairs as they looked at each other.

After a moment of silent reflection and concern, Ron broke the silence.

"We're in trouble," he said simply, as he looked over at his friends. "Snape knows how to get past Fluffy... that probably means he knows how to get past *everything* the other teachers did."

"And with Dumbledore gone..." Hermione put in, a faint look of fear clear on her face as she stared briefly up at the ceiling, as though trying to look for hope of some kind.

"Yeah..." Harry said, nodding grimly as he looked at his sister.

Neither of them had to speak; they both knew that the same thought was currently occupying their minds.

With Dumbledore- the only person Voldemort had ever actually *feared*- gone from Hogwarts, it seemed a safe bet that Snape and Voldemort would be going after the Philosopher's Stone that very night.

And, since they still had absolutely *no* evidence that there was anything wrong, there was only one thing for them to do.

Looking once more at his friends to make sure they knew what he was about to say, Harry made his decision.

"We're going down the trapdoor," he said resolutely, looking between Ron and Hermione, grateful to see no sign of disagreement from the two of them.

It was a terrifying prospect, of course- Harry knew that as well as anybody could, given what he'd lost the last time Voldemort was in power- but, when the alternative was allowing Voldemort to regain power...

They had to risk it.

Chapter 17 – Through The Trapdoor

Later that night, when the rest of Gryffindor House had gone to bed, Harry and Ron- both had gone up to their dorms to avoid suspicion, but neither had even bothered to change into their pyjamas, just getting into bed as early as they could without anybody noticing them- crept out of the dorms and down the stairs, each holding their wands in their right hands. Harry also had his invisibility cloak slung over his shoulder, and the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas was tucked securely in his pocket; he doubted that any of them could *sing* well enough to put 'Fluffy' to sleep.

As soon as he and Ron reached the bottom, finding Hermione already waiting for them behind a chair- Harry wasn't surprised to see she was holding her own flute- he quickly tossed the cloak over the three of them, Ron- as the tallest- in the middle as he and Hermione positioned themselves on either side of him.

"We'll need to move carefully," Harry whispered, looking anxiously at his friends. "If anybody spots even a *foot* outside the cloak, it'll give the whole game away; we have to move as fast as possible, and try *not* to freak out at every little thing, got me? Keep an eye out for Filch or Mrs Norris, and stay away from them; if we have to, we'll take another route, but we *have* to get to the corridor as soon as-

Hermione cut Harry off by clamping a hand over his mouth. For a moment, Harry was puzzled, but then he saw Neville Longbottom coming down the stairs, looking anxiously around himself. For a moment, Harry froze- had Neville heard them?- but then Neville's eyes flicked to something on the floor and he smiled in relief.

"*Trevor!*" he whispered softly, dashing over and grabbing the toad before heading back towards the stairs, keeping a tight grip of the small green creature as he headed back towards the dorms. For a moment, there was silence as the three people under the cloak waited for his footsteps to fade away at last, until, finally, the room was silent once again, leaving them to look anxiously at each other under the cloak.

“OK... *that* was close,” Ron whispered, looking over at Harry and Hermione as he spoke. “So... shall we get out of here now?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, grimly indicating the portrait hole before him. “We’ve got to get down there as soon as possible; I don’t know when Snape’s going after the Stone, but the sooner the better.”

Nodding in agreement, Ron and Hermione quickly started walking towards the door, Harry swiftly joining them as they hurried for the portrait hole.

As soon as they were outside the portrait hole, the three of them began to hurry towards the third floor corridor as rapidly as they could, each of them anxiously scanning their surroundings. In the dark, it was easy enough for every shadow they passed by to be mistaken for Filch, while every breath of wind could be easily taken for Peeves passing by them before he alerted somebody else to their presence. They did briefly pass by Mrs Norris as she prowled the first-floor corridors, but apart from Ron’s request to kick her- a request that was quickly shushed by Harry and Hermione- that went by without incident.

Eventually, the three of them found themselves standing outside the door to the third floor corridor, looking anxiously at each other as they shrugged the cloak off their shoulders and glanced around at each other, silent for a moment before Harry spoke.

“We’d better leave the cloak here,” he said, folding it up and placing it behind a nearby gargoyle. “Taking it through whatever traps have been set up would probably just be a waste of time; if nothing else, I doubt there’s anything in there that depends solely on *sight* to see its ‘targets’.”

Taking a deep breath, he turned to look at the door before him, grasping the handle before he turned back to look at his friend and sister.

“Are you both *sure* you want to do this?” he asked them, looking anxiously between the two.

“Well...” Hermione said, a hesitant expression on her face for a brief moment, before she shrugged it off and looked intently at her brother. “As you probably guessed, I’m not *certain*, but if I let my little brother go off alone after all this, I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

“Hermione...” Harry growled, the smile on his face belying the tone of his voice, “less of the ‘little brother’, please?”

Then he reached over and gave her a brief, grateful squeeze on the shoulder, more grateful than he could even bring himself to say, but knowing at the same time that Hermione didn’t need words to know how much he appreciated what she was prepared to risk for him. A quick glance at Ron received an equally confident-yet-shaky nod, and Harry reached out to open the door with one hand, even as he and Hermione reached into their pockets to pull out the flutes Hagrid had made for them.

As they opened the door, Harry and Hermione instantly put the flutes to their lips and began to blow- not really any specific tune, but simply blowing into the flute as their fingers moved along the holes-, and, in a matter of seconds, the dog’s growls had stopped and it had slumped to the ground before them, fast asleep.

“Keep playing...” Ron whispered anxiously over at his friends as he slowly crept towards the trapdoor that ‘Fluffy’ had been guarding. Gingerly, Ron moved the dog’s giant paw from the door, constantly glancing at it every time it twitched in its sleep- it was all too easy to imagine what could happen if its ‘weakness’ to music had been exaggerated and it woke up at the wrong time- until, finally, Ron had taken a grip of the iron ring in the door and pulled it open. Glancing briefly down the hole, Ron sighed and looked back at the other two.

“Nothing,” he said, evidently understanding their curious expressions. “It’s just blackness; I can’t even see any stairs, so we’ll probably have to drop.”

Brief glances were exchanged between the two flute-players, and Harry pointed to himself after a moment’s pause.

“You want to go first?” Ron asked uncertainly. “I don’t know... it seems pretty deep-”

Rolling his eyes, Harry glanced over at Hermione to make sure that she was still blowing on her flute; she was looking at him apprehensively, evidently aware of what he was about to do, but seemed prepared to let him take the first 'step' nevertheless.

With that confirmed, Harry tucked the flute he was playing into his pocket, walked over to stand beside the trapdoor, and looked briefly at Ron.

"If there *is* something dangerous down there, I'd prefer to be the one to face it first," he said simply to his friend, in a tone that clearly allowed for no argument. "If something goes wrong, you and Hermione go and send a message to Dumbledore, OK?"

"OK..." Ron said, nodding uncertainly.

"Good," Harry replied simply.

With that, he jumped into the hole before him, briefly feeling overwhelmed by the rush of cold, dark air flying past his head, and then...

FLUMP.

That was the only way Harry could describe the sound that was made when he landed; a kind of muffled 'thump', as he hit something that felt like a large plant; the light made it difficult to see it clearly, but it definitely *felt* like he was on a giant leaf of some kind.

"It's OK!" he yelled up to the light in the roof that was the only thing that indicated the presence of the trapdoor he'd entered by. "It's a soft landing; you can jump!"

No sooner had the form that Harry assumed to be Ron dropped through the portal than he suddenly realised that snakelike tendrils were starting to wind themselves around his legs.

"What the *hell*...?" he muttered, staring incredulously at the tendrils gathering around his legs. "This is *not* happening..."

Then Ron landed, prompting tendrils to start sneaking along his own legs, and Harry had to act.

"Hermione!" he yelled up at the trapdoor. *"Take care when you come down; we've got a moving plant down here!"*

Harry didn't mind admitting- even if it was only to himself- that if it had been anyone else he was talking to, he would have told them to get away from the trapdoor as fast as they could.

But, as it was Hermione he was talking to, he knew that such a thing would be pointless; if their positions were reversed, *he* wouldn't leave *her* in danger, and he knew for a fact that she'd do the same thing.

He wasn't disappointed; even as he pulled out his wand to try a couple of quick spells that sent the tendrils briefly recoiling from his legs- Ron was still trying to just crawl away from them and was only succeeding in attracting more of the things- he heard the soft *flump* as Hermione hit the plant, followed by her swiftly rolling off to the side, pressing herself up against a damp wall where the plant couldn't get to her.

"It's a Devil's Snare!" she yelled, staring in desperation at the plant that held her brother and her friend.

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called," Ron muttered sarcastically as he strained at his bonds, which were rapidly tightening around his legs.

*"Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to *kill* it!"* Hermione yelled over at her friend.

*"Well, could you remember a little *faster*, I can't do this *forever*, you know!"* Harry yelled over at her, as he desperately crawled along the plant while launching spells at the tendrils aiming for his legs, cursing as he failed to actually make any significant impact on this bizarre giant 'flytrap'.

"Devil's Snare... Devil's Snare..." Hermione muttered to herself desperately. *"Let's see... it likes the dark and damp..."*

“Got it!” Harry yelled. Aiming his wand down, he yelled out “*Incendio!*” as loudly as he could, and sighed in relief as the plant began to wriggle in agony as the flames spread; waterproof fires may be Hermione’s speciality, but Harry could still cast a decent charm if the need arose. As the plant flailed around desperately in pain, it unravelled back from the two young wizards it had been holding trapped, letting Ron and Harry rapidly dash over to Hermione, who was quickly rewarded with a hug from Harry.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling gratefully at his sister. “Lucky you pay more attention than me in Herbology.”

“And lucky that you always keep a clear head in a crisis,” Hermione retorted, grinning back at her brother. “I’d probably have instinctively started worrying about how there wasn’t any *wood*...”

For a moment, the two of them chuckled slightly at the thought of that, but then Ron coughed slightly and jerked his thumb towards a stone passageway leading away from the plant.

“Come on,” he said, as he turned and started to walk down the passage. “We’d better get moving; the sooner we’re out of here, the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

Nodding in agreement, Harry and Hermione followed Ron down the passageway, neither of them trying not to think too much about how much the passageway reminded them of Gringotts; if they ended up facing an actual *dragon*, like those that were rumoured to be protecting the wizarding bank, Harry was pretty sure they’d be finished faster than you could say ‘snitch’... they’d had trouble just dealing with *Norbert*, and he wasn’t even fully grown at the time...

Ron suddenly paused in his trek along the passageway.

“Can you hear something?” he whispered, glancing over curiously at his friends.

Now that Ron mentioned it, Harry *could* hear a sound he hadn’t been aware of before; a faint rustling and clinking, almost like a bunch of birds had started flying around in a room full of wind chimes.

“Look,” Hermione whispered, pointing at the faint gleam of light at the end of the passage before the three of them. “There’s light up ahead; I think I see something moving...”

“Keep going, but be careful,” Harry added, pulling out his wand once more as he and his friends continued to advance. As they reached the end of the passage, they found themselves in a brilliantly-lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. Apart from the heavy wooden door on the other side of the room, the only thing Harry could see from the passageway was a couple of broomsticks scattered around the chamber, and a large number of small, jewel-bright birds flapping around above them, evidently the source of the sound they’d heard earlier.

Wait a minute... Harry muttered to himself, as he looked at the birds more carefully for a moment.

“Those aren’t *birds*,” he said, staring at them in surprise as he looked over at the others. “They’re *keys*!”

“Really?” Hermione asked, looking up at the winged keys for a moment before she smiled slightly and looked back at her brother. “Well, that’s a relief; I was worried that the challenge here was that we’d have to get the door open before being pecked to death by the birds.”

“Yeah; instead, all we need to do is find *one* key amid all *those* things,” Ron muttered grimly as he stared up at the ceiling, the top of the chamber practically invisible behind all the wings. “Any ideas how we can even work out which one *might* be the right key, short of just grabbing all of them one at a time?”

“Well, since we’re pretty sure that Snape’s *already* gone through, it seems like a decent guess that whatever key opens this door will have some sign of damage; I doubt you could grab one of those things and not leave *some* sign of it around the wings,” Harry explained, as he looked over at his friends. “All we need to do is find a key that looks like it’s already been used, and it should be easy from there.”

“And what if he used *several* of them?” Ron pointed out critically. “How are we meant to pick the right one *then*?”

Harry shrugged as he picked up a broom. “Given that Snape helped set up the defences for this thing, it seems likely that he knew what at least *some* of the other teachers were doing; it seems like a pretty safe guess that he’d have a pretty good idea what key he’d have been looking for here, if nothing else.”

“Makes... sense, I suppose,” Hermione muttered, slightly uncertain as she looked uncertainly at one of the broom. “Um... Harry? Do I have to... y’know... *fly* on this?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation they currently faced, Harry allowed himself a small smile as he looked at his sister.

“Don’t worry about it; Ron and I’ll attend to this bit,” he said, patting her reassuringly on the shoulder as he and Ron walked over to grab the broom. “You helped us with the Devil’s Snare; I’ll just consider this our time to shine and take it from there.”

He glanced over at where Ron was setting himself up on the broom and smiled reassuringly at his friend.

“You ready?” he asked casually.

“As I’ll ever be,” Ron replied, nodding in confirmation. With that, the two of them slung their legs over the broomsticks and flew up into the air, leaving Hermione to stand on the ground and wait for them to find the key.

The two boys had only been flying for a couple of minutes- Ron was actually rather good at this, Harry noted; he’d evidently inherited his family’s general talent for the sport- when Harry’s eyes finally fell on a large silver key with a bent wing that was flying slightly slower than the others.

Harry didn’t even stop to think; he knew what he was capable of, and he had no doubts about his ability to pull this off. He’d caught the golden snitch on two separate occasions already- to say nothing of the remembrall and the golf balls he’d practised with all those months

ago- and the snitch alone moved far faster and was significantly more agile than these keys. If he couldn't catch

Turning the broom to face the key- it was a bit slower than what he was used to, but still pretty fast- he charged forward, one hand outstretched, and swiftly had it pinned to the wall before him, wing beating forlornly as Harry smiled back at his friends. Taking a firm grip of the key, Harry flew back down to the floor, closely followed by Ron, and subsequently opened the door before him, then releasing the key to fly back up to join its fellows.

"Well, that wasn't too bad," Hermione shrugged, looking curiously over at her brother as they walked through the door. "Where was the challenge in *that*, I ask you, I mean, they actually *give* you the opportunity to find a way out..."

"That's the thing about these traps, I guess; it's probably meant to be the accumulation of them that's the problems, rather than each one on its own," Harry mused, as he glanced back at the door as it shut. "You have to admire Flitwick, really; that was some *very* impressive charm-work..."

"Flitwick?" Ron said, looking over in confusion at his friend. "What does- oh yeah, he was one of the teachers who helped set this up, wasn't he?"

"Exactly," Hermione said, nodding in confirmation. "Sprout must have provided the Devil's Snare, Flitwick did the keys, it seems like a safe bet that Snape's will involve potions in some manner, so the only real mysteries down here are McGonagall's, Quirrell's, and Dumbledore's."

"No need to worry about Dumbledore's for the moment; knowing him, it'll probably be the last one of the lot," Harry said, shrugging nonchalantly as the three of them entered the next chamber, which was almost totally dark. "All we need to do is... is..."

Harry's voice trailed off somewhat as he took in the sight before them. It was a giant chessboard, filled with various giant-sized stone wizard chessmen, all of which were taller than they were. They were currently at the black end of the chessboard, facing the tall white

chessmen on the other side, with the wizard 'pawns' holding their weapons between the spaces on the board and preventing anybody from just walking across.

"Ah," Hermione said, swallowing slightly as she looked at the board. "*This* would be McGonagall's, I assume..."

"Most likely," Harry sighed, as he studied the board. "Looks like we'll have to *play* our way across..."

"Right then," Ron said, stepping forward with a slight smile on his face as he looked at his friends. "No offence, but chess is my forte; I'll do this one, OK?"

"Fair enough," Harry said, smiling reassuring at his friend; after all, he and Hermione had already cracked one test each with *their* talents, so it was only fair that Ron have a chance to shine himself. "Chess is your game, Ron; make your call."

"Right then," Ron said, nodding with renewed confidence as he turned his attention back to the board before him. "We'll probably have to take the place of three pieces for this to work; Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, you be a castle."

"And you?" Hermione asked, looking over at Ron with a slight smile on her face; it made a change to see him be willing to take charge for once, rather than almost always waiting for her or Hermione to take the lead.

"I'm going to be a knight," Ron said, nodding resolutely, his confidence evident as three chessmen, apparently having 'heard' them, moved off the board to allow them to take position.

You have to admit, Hermione mused to herself, smiling slightly as the three of them took up position and Ron began to issue his orders to the other pieces, *he's definitely a different person when he's in his element*.

Ron knew that she and Harry never *intended* to make him feel stupid or anything like that, but the fact of the matter remained that they were significantly better at their schoolwork than he was, even if they

didn't make it obvious. Right now, however, he was doing something that he *knew* he was good at, tackling a problem that he *knew* how to deal with, and his confidence showed. In an almost calm voice, Ron directed the pieces around the board, directing Hermione to take a bishop and moving Harry to evade an 'attack' by a castle.

Then, of course, Ron paused for a few moments, looking anxiously around himself, and Hermione found herself suddenly worried.

This was *not* good...

"Uh... Ron?" she asked, looking anxiously at the red-haired boy standing near the middle of the chessboard. "What's wrong?"

"Yes..." Ron mused softly, almost to himself. "It's the only way... I've got to be taken..."

"NO!" Harry yelled, looking over in shock at his friend. "You *can't* do-"

"That's chess!" Ron shouted back over at the two of them. "You've got to make *some* sacrifices! I take one step forward and the queen'll take me; that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!"

"But-" Hermione protested as she looked at her friend.

"Look, do you *want* to stop Snape or not?" the youngest male Weasley said, looking critically over at her. "If you don't hurry up, he'll already have the Stone and have handed it over to Voldemort!"

For a moment, there was silence, but then Harry looked over at Hermione and sighed in a dejected, resigned manner.

Hermione knew what her brother was saying even without him saying it.

There's nothing else we can do.

As much as Hermione hated the idea of Ron having to... sacrifice himself... for them to succeed, there was nothing else they could do right now.

“Ready?” Ron asked, his face pale but determined as he looked ahead of himself. “Here I go... don’t hang around once you’ve won...”

As Ron stepped forward, Harry could only cross his fingers, praying that the queen’s attack wouldn’t be powerful enough to do any *permanent* damage to Ron...

Then the queen moved towards Ron, striking Ron had around the head with her stone arm and sending him crumbling to the ground.

“NO!” Hermione yelled, as she raised a foot to walk towards her friend-

“*Don’t*,” Harry said, holding out a hand firmly to stop his sister. “We’re still in play; you move now, and *you’re* the next move in the game.”

After a moment’s pause to make sure his sister was doing what he’d asked her to, Harry moved three spaces to the left, halting as he stared up at the white king before him.

“Checkmate,” he said simply.

With that, the white king released his grip on his sword, sending it crashing down to the ground before Harry. As the chessmen stepped away, leaving the path ahead clear, Harry and Hermione exchanged a brief glance before walking hastily towards the door, sparing only brief glances at Ron as they walked.

“What if he’s-”

“He’ll be fine,” Harry stated grimly as he walked onwards, refusing to contemplate anything else; he’d survived multiple beatings when he was only five, so Ron *had* to be able to survive *one* blow at over twice that age. “OK, so that’s three down; we’ve only got Quirrell’s and Snape’s left to get through...”

He paused for a moment as he raised his nose and sniffed uncertainly. “What the hell is *that*?”

“It’s coming from behind here...” Hermione muttered, looking uncertainly at the door before them. Pulling out their wands, she and

Harry exchanged another brief glance with each other before they opened the door before them, each tensed for anything...

Then they found their eyes almost watering as they saw a disgusting-smelling, comatose troll, larger even than the one they'd fought at Halloween, lying on the ground with a large bump on its forehead.

"Oh my *god*..." Hermione whispered, a hand over her mouth as she stared over at her brother in shock. "Somebody *fought* that thing..."

"Defeating a troll and defeating a wizard are totally different things; we shouldn't start worrying that we won't be able to handle whatever's waiting for us at the other end just because they took *that* out," Harry said grimly as he indicated the door. "Come on, let's get out of here; I can hardly *breathe*..."

As they hurried through the next door, Harry was relieved to see that this one led directly to the next room, which at least seemed simpler than the last few 'tests' they'd faced; it was only seven bottles on a table in the centre of the room, all of different shapes.

"Snape's at last, huh?" Harry sighed, as he shook his head while staring at the potions before him. "So, what- WHOA!" he yelled; he and Hermione had no sooner walked through the door than purple-Harry had to look twice, but they were *definitely* purple flames- leapt up behind them, while black flames appeared before them.

"Ah," Hermione said, looking back at the flames with a dejected expression. "Well, that's going to make this whole thing *very* awkward."

"Tell me about it..." Harry muttered, as he studied the room around them- maybe there was some kind of switch he could use to turn the flames off...

"Hey... what's this?" he said, pausing in his examination as he noticed a roll of paper lying on the table beside the bottles. Walking over to the table, he picked it up and studied the words written on it;

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, whichever you would find*

One among us seven will let you move again,
Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us our killers, waiting hidden in line.
Choose, unless you want to stay here forevermore.
To help us in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the potion tries to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you can see clearly, all are on different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, second left and second on the right
Are twins but different on first sight

"Great... a bloody logic puzzle..." Harry groaned, as he stared at the 'puzzle' before him before handing the paper over to Hermione. "You're the Spock of this family; I'm just the amateur Sherlock Holmes. Your turn to crack the puzzle, OK?"

"I'm not *that* bad-" Hermione began to protest.

"Please, Hermione; I sometimes need to look to make sure your ears *aren't* pointed," Harry replied, chuckling slightly as he looked at his sister. "Anyway, you get on and use that brain of yours to see what you can do about cracking this code; I'll wait."

With that, Harry leant back against a nearby wall, placed his hands behind his head, and stared up at the ceiling, a confident smile on his face. Sighing slightly, Hermione turned her attention back to the piece of paper in her hand, pursing her lips as she stared at the clues.

"OK..." she muttered to herself as she studied the clues, glancing back at the bottles as she turned over the possibilities in her mind. "Seven bottles... one will get us through the black flames... one will take us back... three contain poison... two contain nettle wine... poisons are always on the left of the nettle wine... the big and the small ones *don't* contain poison..."

After a few moments of muttering, during which Harry tried to keep himself occupied by recalling a couple of his favourite Sherlock

Holmes stories- worrying about what he might end up facing when they got *through* the flames before them wouldn't help anybody- Hermione clapped her hands in relief.

"Got it," she said brightly as she looked back over at Harry. "This rounded one," she explained, as she picked up a bottle on the right end of the line, "will take us back through the purple flames, while... this... little one," she said, her cheeriness fading as she picked up the almost-empty small bottle she'd just picked up, "will... take us through... the *black* flames..."

Harry didn't even need to voice the problem with that arrangement; there was barely enough potion in that bottle for *one* person, never mind for *two*.

After a moment's silence, Harry sighed and reached out to take the smaller bottle from Hermione.

"I'll go on," he said, as he looked at Hermione. "You go back, get Ron, get a couple of broomsticks, and get out of here to call for help, OK?"

"But-" Hermione began, looking desperately at her brother, clearly about to protest his decision.

"*Look*, Hermione," Harry interrupted, putting the bottle back down on the table as he reached over to take his sister by the shoulders and glaring at her, "it would be obvious to my thick-headed uncle there's only enough for *one* person in this bottle, and even *that's* pushing it. If Snape's working for Voldemort, he's *already* got reason to go after me; I'm *not* giving him any more reasons to go after *you* than he's got already."

"But... but *Harry*..." Hermione protested weakly as she looked at the young boy who she considered her brother in every way other than blood. "What if Voldemort's with Snape *already*?"

For a moment, Harry hesitated, giving that matter the consideration it merited, before he shrugged and sighed.

"Well... I've beaten him once, and I didn't even *know* I was doing it at the time," he said, trying not to make it sound like such a big deal;

even putting aside his dislike of his reputation, he didn't want to make Hermione more nervous than she already was. "I'll probably get lucky again."

For a moment, the two of them just stood there looking at each other, uncertain what to say in this moment, until Hermione finally broke the silence by sighing and giving Harry a brief hug.

"Good luck," she said simply, looking at her brother with a resolved expression. She may look relatively collected, but Harry knew her well enough to know that she was fighting to stay in control of herself right now, and wisely decided not to say anything; they needed to do what had to be done as soon as possible.

Turning to look at the two bottles of potion before her, Hermione quickly picked up the one she'd identified as the one to take them back, swallowed it, shivered slightly- clearly it was a very cold drink; Hermione had *never* totally understood Harry's fondness for ice- and then turned around and hurried back through the flames, leaving Harry standing alone in the room.

Taking a deep breath- as much as he trusted Hermione's judgement, a *little* apprehension was only to be expected, after all- Harry reached out, picked up the bottle holding the potion that would take him through the fire in the other direction, and swallowed it.

An icy feeling ran through his body, and Harry knew that he was either shielded from the flames, or he was as good as dead already from taking poison by accident.

Either way, he had to get moving.

Turning to face the black fires before him, Harry pulled out his wand, took a deep breath, and dived forward through the flames. Even as he walked through them, his clothes and skin remained untouched while he himself started to sweat... it was stifling hot... he could barely see... he felt sure that his skin was going to burn... he cursed himself for having to do this...

Then he was out the other side, standing in a small stone room with only two objects in it.

One was a tall object, glimmering faintly from the light caused by the fire, that he couldn't quite see from this distance and in this relatively poor light; he'd need to take a few more steps towards it to make it out completely.

The other was a person, but it was the last person Harry had *ever* expected to see here after all their deductions about Snape's motives for working with Voldemort.

"Quirrell?" he said, unable to stop himself at the shock of seeing the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher standing in the stone chamber before him.

"Me," the man replied, smiling maliciously at Harry.

Then he casually raised his fingers, clicked them once, and Harry suddenly found himself bound on all sides by thick ropes from nowhere, staring incredulously at the man before him

Chapter 18 – The Man With Two Faces

“Did you honestly think that it was *Snape* all this time?” Quirrell asked, looking mockingly at Harry, his usual stutter having vanished from his tone as he looked at the young boy before him. “Then again, I suppose he *was* the likely suspect; next to him who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-Professor Q-Quirrell?”

Harry took little satisfaction in noting that his stutter this time was evidently fake; the casual, almost taunting expression on his face made it clear that he'd been feigning his earlier 'scared-of-his-own-shadow' attitude.

He may not *like* that fact, but at least it meant that he had a better idea of what he was up against right now; it wouldn't do for him to get into a fight thinking that he was dealing with a weakling who was afraid of his own shadow.

“But... but *Snape* tried to *kill* me!” he yelled; inwardly, he already thought he'd worked out where Quirrell fit into the pieces of the puzzle that they'd thought fitted together to show *Snape*, but it couldn't hurt to make Quirrell think he was more confused and less confident than he actually *was*.

“No, no; *I* tried to kill you, but your foolish sister knocked me down and broke my eye contact while I was trying to make your broom throw you off; an accident, of course, but it was practically impossible for me to get the chance to do it again before the game finished,” Quirrell explained nonchalantly, which at least confirmed Harry's theory; he'd *suspected* that was how Quirrell tied into that little 'incident' as soon as he saw the man standing in the room instead of *Snape*. “I would have done it already if *Snape* hadn't been muttering the counter-curse trying to save you; he even went so far as to referee your next Quidditch match just to make sure I wouldn't try that again...”

Harry blinked incredulously; he'd been expecting the part about why his broom had stopped bucking, but couldn't quite believe what he'd just heard about why he hadn't fallen off *earlier*.

“Sorry; *Snape* wanted to *protect* me?” he said, staring at Quirrell as though the man had just told him that the sky was green. “What are you talking about; he *hates* me! He’s never even given me points in class; why would he try to *save* me?”

“Naturally he hates you; he was at Hogwarts with your father,” Quirrell said casually, as he stared at the young boy tied up in front of him. “The two of them really did hate each other back then, but he doesn’t want you *dead*. That’s why he refereed your next game; he wanted to make sure I wouldn’t try something like that again.”

Then he smiled maliciously as he continued to stare at his target, reminding Harry uncomfortably of a shark eyeing its prey. “Pointless, really; with Dumbledore watching I’d have to be completely insane to try anything at *that* moment. Letting that troll in to provide a distraction on Halloween was one thing; at least then he couldn’t see what I was doing during all that chaos...”

“*You* let that thing in?” Harry yelled; if it wasn’t for the fact that he’d prefer to find out more about what was going on, he might have risked countering Quirrell’s earlier comment about not being insane.

“Certainly,” the so-called ‘Defence Against the Dark Arts’ teacher continued, a slight sneer on his face as though he couldn’t believe Harry hadn’t guessed that already. “I have a certain ‘gift’ with trolls; you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, not only did you actually knock it out before it could cause enough chaos, but *Snape* tried to head me off at the third floor, and that stupid dog couldn’t even bite his leg off properly when he got a bit too close.”

Well, Harry mused to himself, recalling his old theory about *Snape*’s leg injury that long-ago day in the courtyard, *at least I was right about where he got the limp from...*

“Now then,” Quirrell continued, turning away from Harry as though the young wizard was now beneath his notice, “be quiet, boy; I need to examine this fascinating mirror.”

Now that Quirrell had mentioned it, thus drawing Harry's attention *off* the demented basket-case in the turban before him, he finally realised what the object was behind Quirrell, in the centre of the room.

It was a magnificent mirror, high enough to reach the ceiling in a conventional room, with an ornate gold frame perched on two clawed 'feet'. Written above the glass were the words *erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*, which Harry mentally reversed as mirror-writing for *I show not your face but your heart's desire*.

It can show you what you'd want the most when you look into it? Harry mused to himself, looking in surprise at the mirror before him as Quirrell walked over to stand in front of it. *Interesting idea, I admit, but what's something like that doing down here*

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone..." Quirrell muttered to himself as he studied the mirror before him, almost sounding as though he'd forgotten Harry was even there in the first place. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this... but he'll *never* get back from London in time to discover what's been happening; I have all the time I need..."

Ah, Harry mused to himself, nodding thoughtfully despite his predicament. He supposed that kind of idea might work out; if this mirror showed you what you wanted to see the most, than anyone coming this far would probably *most* want to see them finding the Stone, which would probably mean they'd see where it was hidden...

But that just seemed to be almost too *simple* to Harry; there had to be *something* about this part of the test that would make *sure* the Stone was protected. Admittedly, some of the stuff he, Ron and Hermione had confronted had only been dealt with because they were each using their particular strengths and worked as a group rather than the individuals the traps had been designed to target, but it still seemed to him that, after all those previous 'not-so-difficult' tests, Dumbledore would have wanted to make *sure* that this last test would keep the Stone safe.

"I see the Stone..." Quirrell muttered in front of Harry, apparently unconcerned about the young wizard now that he'd tied him up for the moment. "I'm presenting it to my master... but where *is* it?"

OK then, Harry mused to himself, as he tried to struggle against his bonds without making it obvious that he was trying to get out of them, *looks like my second theory was correct; this thing doesn't show you where the Stone's hidden even if you want it badly enough; I've still got a chance at figuring out where it's gone.*

The only problem was, what was he going to do *now*? Tackling Quirrell while he was tied up like this would be practically pointless, and even if he was fully mobile and armed, he had little doubt that Quirrell could effectively counter any spell he'd been taught up to this point.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

"I don't understand... is the Stone *inside* that mirror? Should I break it?"

Great; now the whackjob's talking to himself... Harry groaned mentally as he tried to figure out what his next move should be. Fighting Quirrell wasn't an option- the odds were too much in favour of the other guy winning the confrontation- but, equally, just *staying* here wasn't an option; he'd probably be killed as soon as Quirrell had what he wanted...

"What does this mirror do?" Quirrell asked, looking pathetically up at the ceiling. "How does it work? Help me, master!"

Then, to Harry's shock, a voice answered, apparently coming from the back of Quirrell's *head*.

"Use the boy... use the boy..."

As Quirrell rounded on Harry, a broad, malicious grin on his face as he clapped his hands and the bonds around Harry's arms and legs vanished, leaving the young wizard free to slightly tense himself and prepare for whatever might be about to happen; he may be mobile once more, but he still doubted now was the best time to try and fight back.

“Potter,” Quirrell stated as he glared at Harry, one hand hovering uncomfortably close to his wand, “come here, look in the mirror, and tell me what you see.”

As Harry walked towards the mirror, he noted, with a slight smile, that Quirrell's interrogation abilities were evidently not that efficient; he hadn't given Harry a *single* reason to actually tell him anything useful.

Does he seriously think that I'll be honest with somebody who's threatening to kill me? he mused to himself, as he positioned himself in front of the mirror. He may have little chance of surviving this little 'confrontation' with this raving loony, but at least in his current position he might at least manage to discover *something* useful about whatever he was dealing with here.

A part of him had to wonder what he'd have seen if he'd actually looked into this mirror during a quieter moment; his biological parents sprung to mind, but, quite frankly, after spending so long with the Grangers treating him as their son, he barely spent much time even *thinking* about what life would have been like if he'd been brought up with his parents from the beginning...

Then, as he found himself in front of the mirror, he looked into it, and was more than slightly disappointed to find that it didn't seem to be doing anything; all that was happening was that he was being shown his own reflection, as it was at the present, with all the cuts and bruises that he'd accumulated over this whole mess.

So much for showing your greatest desire, Harry mused to himself, as his cheek smarted slightly from where a key had come a bit too close to him. *I don't even look like I'm in good health, never mind that I'm finding the Stone...*

Then, much to his surprise, his reflection reached into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone, about the size of a fist. It winked briefly at Harry, and then dropped the stone back into its pocket...

At the very moment that Harry felt a sudden weight in his own pocket.

His eyes widened in shock.

Somehow, he'd *got the Stone*.

"What is it?" Quirrell's voice said, breaking into Harry's train of thought; fortunately, Harry hadn't allowed himself to *show* his surprise at having the stone in his pocket. "What do you see?"

Harry swallowed; this was a risk, but it was all he could think of that wouldn't be guaranteed to get him killed without making him seem like he wasn't taking the situation seriously.

"I... I see myself leaving the trapdoor," he said simply. "I've... well, it looks like I've managed to get out of here."

Cursing under his breath, Quirrell shoved Harry to the side as he moved back in front of the mirror. For a moment, Harry thought about making a run for it- he definitely *wasn't* eager for the Stone to be discovered- but then that same eerie voice spoke once more, and Harry knew that any escape plan would have to go on hold.

"He lies... he lies..."

"Potter!" Quirrell yelled, spinning around to glare at the student once again. "*What did you see?*"

Something in his tone finally managed to drive Harry to shake off any ideas that he might manage to get out of this confrontation alive so long as he avoided actively insulting or defying Quirrell.

If he was going to die, he'd die on his *feet*; he'd tried cowering away when he'd known what was going to happen to him in the past, and nearly ended up dead as a result of it.

"You want to know what I saw?" he stated grimly as he turned to look at his opponent, one hand reaching for his wand as he did so. "If your 'master' is so powerful, why don't you *make* me tell you?"

For a moment, as Quirrell glared at Harry, the young wizard thought that he was about to be attacked, but then that same strange voice 'spoke' once more, and Harry knew that he was about to have more things to worry about.

"Let me speak to him..." the voice whispered, *"face to face..."*

"But Master..." Quirrell began uncertainly, "you are not strong enough-"

"I have strength enough... for this..."

As Quirrell's hands reached up to begin to unravel his turban, Harry briefly slid his hand inside his sleeve, where he'd hidden his wand shortly after the escape from the Devil's Snare, but, after a moment's hesitation, decided that it was best left where it was; at the moment, there was nothing to be gained from trying to fight someone who was far more experienced than he was.

Besides, as Quirrell's turban fell away, leaving him with a surprisingly small head, Harry had to confess to a certain curiosity about where that voice was coming from...

Then Quirrell turned around, revealing a chalk-white face with red eyes and a snake-like nose on the back of his head, and Harry suddenly knew that things were far worse than he'd imagined.

"Harry Potter..." the face whispered, in a voice that left Harry feelings as though he was frozen to the spot; a part of him wanted to run, but the rest of him was absolutely terrified at the idea of even *moving* right now.

"Voldemort, I take it?" Harry countered, trying to sound less terrified than he actually was; after spending so long hearing about what Voldemort was capable of, it was rather intimidating to meet him 'face-to-face' at long last.

"You've come down a bit in the world, haven't you?" he said, trying to avoid sounding as terrified as he felt as he indicated Voldemort's position on the back of Quirrell's head; getting Voldemort angry might not be the smartest move, but angry people tended to make mistakes, and, right now, Harry was rather pressed for ideas as far as coming up with a fighting strategy went. "I mean, using somebody else's body? That's kind of pathetic, isn't it?"

"I only exist this way because of you..." Voldemort retorted, his eyes seeming to flash as he glared at Harry. *"Condemned to exist as mere shadow and vapour... possessing form only when I use the body of another... but there have always been those willing to welcome me into their hearts and mind... Unicorn blood has strengthened me these past few weeks... and once I possess the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a new, fresh body of my own... Now, why don't you give me that stone in your pocket?"*

As Harry's hand instinctively moved for the stone in his pocket, he mentally cursed; so much for any hope that he might be able to bluff his way through this immediate 'meeting'.

"Sorry, but I'm not that interested in letting you come back," he retorted, allowing himself a slight smirk that he hoped would contain his fear at the current situation. "As a man renowned for his cunning plans once said, 'my mother always taught me to stand up to homicidal maniacs', and I wholeheartedly agree with his advice on that front."

"Don't be a fool..." Voldemort's face hissed, looking at Harry with a malicious gleam in his eyes. *"Better to save your life and join me than defy me and meet your parents' fate... I greatly enjoyed that final confrontation with them... they both died begging me for mercy..."*

It was that last comment, more than anything, that made Harry snap out of the shocked state; *nobody* insulted his parents like that while he was around.

"Shut UP!" he roared, pulling both hands out of his pockets and clenching them into fists. Before he even had time to realise what a monumentally bad idea this was, he charged towards Voldemort, lashed out with the strongest punch he could throw directly towards Voldemort's face- he was only tall enough to reach the chin, but it still made contact, sending a momentary blinding pain through the scar on his forehead...

And left a large, ugly-looking burn on the 'face' in front of him, right where his fist had made contact with it?

“AARRGGHHH!” Quirrell screamed from the other side of the ‘head’, clutching at the face behind his own; either Voldemort was so shocked at what had happened that he couldn’t scream, or he didn’t really register Quirrell’s pain as his own.

“*Stop him, you fool!*” Voldemort yelled as Quirrell staggered back, clutching the burned area where Harry had made contact with him as Harry stared at his hand, trying to work out what had just happened. He was pretty sure some of kind of ‘Fire Punch’- for lack of a better term; his fist wasn’t actually on fire, but how else did you explain the burn on Voldemort’s ‘face’- *wasn’t* a magical skill that students were taught at any time in their school careers, so how had he managed to burn Voldemort just by touching him?

Then Quirrell began to turn around, his arms raised as though he was about to perform a curse of some kind, and Harry decided to put off analysis of this particular ‘trick’ until later; right now, his more immediate problem was to survive. Lunging forward before Quirrell could even open his mouth to speak, Harry grabbed Quirrell’s face in both hands, a grim expression on his own face as smoke leaked out from under his fingers as they made contact with Quirrell’s flesh.

The pain in his scar was almost killing him, but Harry refused to let go now that he had the upper hand over this... this *thing* that had nearly killed him ten years ago. As he desperately tightened his grin, Harry barely even registered the world around him begin to blur... barely even noticed that the face in his hands was starting to give way in his grip, as though it was falling apart... barely heard a faint voice that seemed to be yelling at him from off to the side...

Then, after what felt like only a moment’s blackness- but, given the sunlight now shining on his face, was probably at least a few hours- Harry sat bolt upright in bed, blinking in confusion at his surroundings.

“Uh...” he groaned, as he slowly sat up, blinking as he reached over to pick up his glasses from a nearby bedside table and place them on his nose. “Wha... what happened?”

“*Harry!*” another voice suddenly yelled, Harry almost instantly finding himself wrapped in the arms of someone he definitely hadn’t been expecting to see at Hogwarts.

“Wha... *Mum?*” he said, pulling back to look in shock at Jane Granger, who was looking at him with faint tears in her eyes as she smiled in relief at him. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Your headmaster called us as soon as he learned about your... well, ‘confrontation’, I suppose is the best term... with that... ‘Voldemort’ person,” Jane replied, pulling back to smile at her adopted son, the faint glimmer of tears in her eyes as she looked at him. “As soon as we learned the full details- he’d vanished, his ‘host’ was dead and you were in a coma- your father and I have been taking turns having days off at the surgery to keep an eye on you; we had to get in a couple of assistants to help keep up with the patients, but it seems to have worked out so far. Quite frankly, you had us worried for a while; you’ve been in that coma for almost a week.”

“A *week?*” Harry repeated, before he groaned and slumped back onto the bed. “Well, at least I’d already *passed* the exams...”

Jane chuckled slightly at that comment.

“At least you still appear to be all right up here,” she said, smiling slightly as she looked down at her son and tapped her forehead. “Only you and Hermione would actually *worry* about *missing* exams at your age...”

“Indeed, Mrs Granger; you have raised two *remarkable* children,” another voice said from the door. Glancing over at the voice, Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly as he saw the speaker, and he was only slightly surprised to see that his mother didn’t look all that happy to see the new arrival either.

Then again, Dumbledore *had* been conspicuous by his absence when Harry had been forced to risk his life against a demented Dark Lord who was using the body of one of his teachers; it was hardly a surprise that Jane would be at least *slightly* annoyed at the man who’d meant to be protecting her son from stuff like that.

“And, as I’ve told you before now,” Jane said as she stood up to glare at the older man, her voice a cold, level tone that Harry couldn’t recall ever hearing before, “if you don’t promise to actually *listen* to those ‘children’ the next time they try to tell you something, my husband and I will be forced to consider transferring our children to *another* wizarding school.”

“I assure you, Mrs Granger-” Dumbledore began, looking at the woman before him in as casual a manner as possible.

“You’ve already apologised to me; I just wanted you to know that Harry knows my feelings on the matter as well,” Jane interrupted, as she glared at the headmaster of Hogwarts. “I can understand that you thought you knew what you were doing, but be assured, if my children are *ever* endangered by your actions- or *inactions*- at any future date, I will not rest until you have lost your job, your reputation, or whatever else I can take from you in a court of law for incompetence. Are we clear?”

“Naturally,” Dumbledore replied, bowing slightly at Harry’s adopted mother as he fixed her with a reassuring smile. “I shall remember that, I can assure you; should Harry or Hermione ever have something they feel they must tell me, I shall ensure that my staff know that they are to take it seriously.”

Glancing at his mother’s expression, Harry couldn’t stop himself from slightly shuddering as he saw the cold expression on his mother’s face at the reference to ‘staff’; reminded of how Professor McGonagall hadn’t believed them when they’d gone to tell her about the Stone, he found himself wondering if his parents had already had some words with the deputy headmistress about that particular ‘mistake’ of theirs...

“Good,” Jane said, nodding briefly at the headmaster before she looked back at Harry and smiled. “I’ll just go and see if I can find your sister and let her know you’re awake, OK? I’ll be back as soon as I’ve found her, I promise.”

“Uh... sure thing,” Harry said, nodding in understanding at Jane as she walked out of the hospital wing. For a moment, he thought about asking Dumbledore if somebody should go with her- he didn’t want to

imagine what could happen if his mother ran into somebody like Malfoy while walking about- but then he saw a student he vaguely recognised as a Gryffindor seventh year walking along with her, and relaxed; it looked like she already had a 'bodyguard' to deal with any magical unpleasantness she might encounter.

"Simply a minor security measure against some of the more... rowdy members of the student body," Dumbledore explained, noting Harry's gaze before he looked directly at the boy in question. "Now then, Harry, you will be pleased to know that Quirrell failed to get his hands on the stone; I managed to arrive in time to prevent that, although you were doing well on your own, I must say."

"Hold on; you got back *that* fast?" Harry interjected, looking in confusion at the headmaster. "I know Hedwig's good, but she's not *that* good..."

"We must have crossed in mid-air; no sooner had I arrived in London than it became clear to me that I was needed most where I had just departed. Regardless, I managed to pull Quirrell off you before the strain proved too much for you- as it was, as you've noted, you were unconscious for a while afterwards- and the Stone has been destroyed to ensure such a thing can never happen again."

Harry's eyes widened at that.

"Wait; the Stone's been *destroyed*?" he asked, looking in shock at the headmaster. "But- but what about Nicholas Flamel? Doesn't he need the Stone-?"

"Oh, you know about Nicholas?" Dumbledore asked, sounding quite delighted at Harry's deduction. "You *did* do your research on the matter, didn't you? Well, Nicholas and I had a little chat, and we both agreed that it was for the best."

"But... he'll die, won't he?"

"He has enough Elixir of Life to set his affairs in order, and then, yes, he will die."

Harry couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed about that. After all the effort he'd gone to while trying to save the Stone to prevent Voldemort from causing any more deaths, he'd ended up being responsible- however indirectly- for somebody dying...

Dumbledore, as though sensing his thoughts, smiled reassuringly at Harry.

"I do not doubt that it is somewhat confusing for someone as young as you, but for Nicholas and Perenelle, dying is merely like going to bed after a *remarkably* long day. In many ways, when you think about it, it is probably for the best; the human mind was never intended to cope with immortality. The trouble is that people have a terrible habit of choosing "

"Ah," Harry said, nodding briefly in understanding before he looked inquiringly at the headmaster. "Uh... so... with the Stone gone... is that the *only* way Voldemort could come back, or are there others?"

"Alas, there are other ways," Dumbledore replied, sighing slightly as he looked apologetically at the young man before him. "Darker, more terrible ways that could give him his body back once again... but, without a follower, he is once again a mere spirit, less even than the meanest of ghosts, unable to be killed, but unable to truly do anything in his current state... It is likely that, without a new follower, and with somebody always there to try and stop him, he will never truly return to power."

Great, Harry mused to himself as he lay back in bed. *So, in other words, he could come back, but there's no way of knowing how...*

Despite that, however, Harry knew that he couldn't dwell on details like that until the time came when he could actually *do* something about it.

Besides, right now, he had a few questions he *really* wanted to know the answer to...

"Uh... Professor?" he asked, looking inquiringly at Dumbledore. "Can I ask you... well, a few questions?"

“Obviously, you’ve already asked me one,” Dumbledore replied, smiling slightly at Harry. “However, you may feel free to ask me more if you wish.”

“Well...” Harry paused for a moment, thinking about what he should ask first, and then decided to go with one of the more long-term questions he had right now. “Were you the one who sent me the cloak?”

Dumbledore blinked in surprise.

“How very intuitive of you, Harry,” he said, looking in surprise at the young boy before him. “May I ask how you worked that out?”

“Well... the note suggested that it had been given to someone who was at school with my dad and also knew me, so that kind of left just you, Professor McGonagall, Hagrid, and Snape,” Harry explained. “Hagrid’s not *great* at keeping secrets- no offence to him, of course-, I don’t see McGonagall breaking rules, and as for Snape...”

He shrugged slightly, unable to stop a slight glare in his eyes at the thought. “Well, from what Quirrell mentioned, it sounded like he and my father hated each other.”

“Very intuitive, Harry,” Dumbledore said, smiling in approval at the student. “And yes, Professor Snape and your father did indeed *not* get on when they were at school together- much like yourself and Mr Malfoy, really-, a state of affairs that only became worse when your father did something that Snape could never forgive.”

“Which was?”

“He saved his life.”

“*What?*”

“Yes...” Dumbledore smiled, nodding at Harry’s surprised expression. “Odd the way some people see things, isn’t it? Professor Snape couldn’t bear remaining in your father’s debt, so I think he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that you make him and

your father equals, thus allowing him to hate your father's memory in peace."

Harry supposed that made sense; he'd certainly read more demented reasons for people's actions in all his mystery novels.

"Oh, one thing's *really* puzzling me... why couldn't Quirrell touch me?"

"Your mother died to save you," Dumbledore explained, looking directly at Harry for the first time as he spoke. "If there is one thing Quirrell and Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He failed to realise that love like your mother's for you would leave a mark- not a scar, no, but a mark that lives in your very skin, granting you some protection for as long as you live. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort

For a moment, Harry couldn't speak, taking a moment or two to collect himself as Dumbledore feigned interest in a bird outside the window.

Even after all the time he'd spent with the Grangers, it was still a relief when he heard something that made it clear that he'd once had biological relatives who actually *cared* about him...

It really made him feel... better about himself, he supposed.

At least he knew that not *all* of his biological family had regarded him as being lower than toilet scum...

Finally, he took a deep breath and looked back at the headmaster.

"Just one last detail I can't *quite* figure out; how did I get the Stone out of the mirror?"

"Ah, *that* was one of my more brilliant ideas," Dumbeldore smiled broadly, before leaning over to whisper briefly to Harry, "and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only a person who wanted to find the Stone- find it, but not use it- would be able to get it, otherwise they would merely see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life..."

With that said, Dumbledore smiled nonchalantly over at Harry as he reached over to pick up one of the boxes of sweets that Harry only now registered were lying around his bed; with his mother and then Dumbledore talking to him, Harry hadn't the time to look around and see how many cards and presents he seemed to have received while he was unconscious.

"Ah, Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans!" Dumbledore smiled, picking out one of the multicoloured beans in question- a golden-brown one, Harry noted- and looking at it with a slight smile. "I was most unfortunate in my youth to come across a vomit flavor one, and since then I'm afraid I've lost my liking for them, but I think I could be safe with a nice toffee, don't you?"

As Dumbledore popped the bean into his mouth, Harry was only slightly surprised when the headmaster choked, a rather distasteful expression appearing on his face as he looked regretfully at Harry. "Alas! Ear-wax."

Harry could only shrug apologetically at that as Dumbledore headed towards the door, a slightly pale expression on his face; clearly, he was in no mood to try another sweet after another rather 'poor' encounter with the Every Flavour Beans.

Shrugging it off- quite frankly, he wasn't sure what else he could have said to Dumbledore even if the headmaster *had* stayed around longer- Harry turned his attention back to the piles of food around him, but before he could even open a Chocolate Frog, Harry heard a loud, familiar voice yelling his name in joy, and he once again found himself engulfed by a bushy-haired figure who was, once again, simultaneously yelling and sobbing into his shoulder.

"THE NEXT TIME YOU DO SOMETHING THAT *IDIOTIC*, HARRY POTTER," Hermione yelled practically into his ear, shock and fear clear in her voice, "I MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO *DISOWN* YOU! WHAT WERE YOU *THINKING*?"

"Hermione..." Harry gasped weakly; his sister, as always when she was either very excited or very scared, was squeezing him so hard he felt like his ribs were going to break, "firstly... limited options... Remember? Secondly... I need to *breath*..."

“Oh... uh... right...” Hermione said, blushing slightly awkwardly as she pulled back before she continued to glare at her brother. “Seriously, though, the next time you’re tempted to put yourself into a coma by tackling a powerful dark wizard, at least *try* and think of something less... potentially lethal, OK?”

“I’ll bear that in mind...” Harry replied, nodding briefly at his sister before he glanced over at his mother and Ron, who were currently standing at the foot of his bed. “Oh, by the way, good to see you’re OK, Ron; I was a bit worried about you after the white queen hit you.”

“If you ever needed another reason to dislike Emma Frost, there you have it,” Hermione said, chuckling slightly as she indicated the lump on Ron’s head. “She helped contribute to the Dark Phoenix mess, and her namesake nearly killed a friend of ours in a chess game.”

“Uh... who’s Emma Frost?” Ron said, looking in confusion at his friend.

Hermione could only roll her eyes as she exchanged a brief, frustrated glare with her brother, briefly sharing their joint exasperation with wizards and their general ignorance of muggle pop culture gems such as the X-Men, before Mrs Granger spoke once again.

“Well, I’d better go and let your father know you’re up, Harry,” she said, looking over slightly apologetically at her son. “If we can, we’ll try and drop in on you before term ends, but if not, we’ll see you when you and Hermione get home, OK?”

“Uh... sure thing, Mum,” Harry said, nodding briefly at his mother, not wanting to voice his confusion; why *wouldn’t* she be allowed to come back?

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wonder for long; as soon as Jane had departed the hospital wing, Hermione had noted Harry’s confusion and was willing to answer his question.

“It’s not exactly normal for muggles to spend so much time in Hogwarts, so the protective charms on the castle have never really been altered to accommodate their presence,” she explained. “All the

anti-muggle charms may not work if you're actually *invited* into the building, but it's still generally uncomfortable for Mum and Dad to be inside the castle on a long-term basis; I think there's something in *Hogwarts: A History* that suggests that there could be long-term damage if they stay inside for too long, but nobody really wants to find out."

"Ah," Harry said, nodding in understanding. "So... they might not be let back in because of... basically... health issues?"

"Pretty much; annoying, isn't it?" Hermione said, sighing slightly before she assumed a more serious expression as she looked at her brother. "Anyway, now that the minor details are out of the way, care to tell me exactly what *actually* happened through the flames? We've heard that Quirrell was possessed by... well, *Voldemort*... but that's about it; what *really* happened down there?"

As Harry recounted the story of what had taken place during that terrible confrontation, he was pleased to note that he still had his little knack for making Hermione jump when he wanted to; admittedly, in this case it was from shock at what he told her had been under Quirrell's turban rather than because he was playing a joke, but the general principle remained the same.

"So... the Stone's gone?" Ron said, as Harry finished the story by explaining what Dumbledore had just told him. "Flamel's just going to *die*?"

"I know... it's kind of depressing for me, too," Harry sighed, as he looked over at Hermione. "I know I *shouldn't* blame myself- if nothing else, Dumbledore assures me that Flamel's decided it's for the best- but... well, y'know... I was trying to *stop* people ending up dead because of Voldemort."

Smiling sympathetically at her brother, Hermione reached over and squeezed his hand, looking reassuringly at him.

"You did the best you could, Harry; nobody can blame you if your best just wasn't *quite* good enough," she said, as she looked at him. "You can't save *everybody*, you know."

"Yeah... I know," Harry said, nodding slightly dejectedly at the thought. "Doesn't stop me *wishing* I could, but I know what you mean."

For a moment, there was silence as the three of them sat there, contemplating what they'd learned, and then Harry shrugged and looked up at his friends. "Anyway, what happened to you guys after we split up?"

"Well," Hermione responded, taking up the story, "I managed to get back to the chess room and get Ron out of there- he was still a bit dazed, but he could walk easily enough-, we took one of the brooms to get past the Devil's Snare, but we were just on our way up to the owlery when we ran into Dumbledore in the entrance hall; he seemed to *know* what was happening- he just said "Harry's gone after him, hasn't he?"- and hurried off to the third floor corridor to help you."

"Uh... do you think he *meant* you to do that?" Ron asked, looking uncertainly at his friend. "I mean, if he sent you the cloak and everything..."

Harry shrugged.

"Who knows?" he said, almost nonchalantly, as he looked back at his friend and his sister. "Maybe he guessed that we'd figure it out *anyway*, so... I dunno, he decided it was best to give us a chance to crack the mystery ourselves rather than go in there half-cocked and *totally* screw it up?"

He shrugged slightly as he leant back, wincing slightly at a brief pain in his head; evidently, he still wasn't quite operating at a hundred per cent yet, but he was getting there. "I'm not saying I *like* it, but I can kind of see where he was coming from at least."

"Yeah, he's barking all right," Ron said, smiling slightly before his expression became slightly dejected as he looked at Harry. "Oh, by the way, the points are all in, and Slytherin won in the end- you missed the last Quidditch match and we were steamrolled by Ravenclaw without you- but at least the food'll be good; the end-of-term feast is tomorrow."

“Ah,” Harry said, groaning slightly as he leant back in his bed. Overall, he supposed it wasn’t surprising that Slytherin had won in the end- it had been pretty close between the two houses before the exams, and without the points they would have won by winning the Quidditch cup it was probably only to be *expected* that Slytherin managed to get a lead- but it was still kind of annoying.

All that work, only to be ended by one stupid coma...

Hearing the faint sound of footsteps, Hermione sighed as she looked at her brother and her friend.

“Sounds like Madam Pomfrey’s coming back; we’d better go,” she said, looking apologetically at Harry. “We’ll see you tomorrow, OK?”

Nodding affirmatively at his sister, Harry watched briefly as she and Ron departed the hospital wing, before he closed his eyes and sank back into a deep rest.

The next morning, baring the occasional twinge in his scar, Harry felt nearly back to normal, and, despite Madam Pomfrey’s apparent uncertainty, was nevertheless given permission to attend the leaving feast that night.

“Just take care not to over-strain yourself; you don’t just snap back from the kind of experience you’ve had,” Madam Pomfrey said grimly as she looked at Harry. “And you also have another visitor.”

Harry was about to ask who it was, but then he saw Hagrid sidle in through the door, as always looking too big to really be *allowed* inside in the first place. Walking over to Harry, Hagrid sat down beside his bed, took one look at the boy, and burst into tears.

“It’s-all-my-ruddy-fault!” he sobbed, his face in his hands. “I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only thing he didn’t know an’ I told him! Yeh could’ve died! All fer a dragon egg! I’ll never drink again! I should be chucked out an’ made ter live as a Muggle!”

“Hagrid...” Harry said, looking sympathetically at his friend. “This is *Voldemort* we’re talking about here... he’d have found out some other way even if you *hadn’t* told him... you shouldn’t *blame* yourself for it...”

“Yeh could’ve died!” Hagrid sobbed. “An’ don’ say the name!”

“*VOLDEMORT!*” Harry yelled, causing Hagrid to stop crying in shock. “I’ve met him, I’ve called him by his name, and he’s been defeated; the Stone’s gone, he can’t use it again, and, all in all, everything worked out. Hagrid, please, just sit down, cheer up, and... have a Chocolate Frog or something...”

Wiping his nose on the back of his hand, Hagrid smiled weakly at the young boy.

“That reminds me; I’ve got yer a present,” he said, as he reached into his large pocket and pulled out a handsome, leather-covered book. “Dumbledore gave me the day off ter fix it- he shoulda sacked me instead- but I sent owls off ter all yer parents’ school friends, asking for... well, just open it an’ see.”

Opening the book curiously, Harry’s eyes widened as he saw the contents. There in the book, smiling at him on every page, were wizarding photographs of two people who could only be his parents; the young man who occupied most of the pictures even *looked* like him, just with the occasional ‘deliberate mistake’, such as the lack of a scar or the grown eyes where his own were green.

“Knew yeh didn’ have of yer own, and... well... thought yeh’d like it,” Hagrid explained, smiling slightly at the young boy before him.

Harry couldn’t even speak, but Hagrid understood.

Having been through one last check-up, Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. Arriving in the already-full Great Hall, Harry tried to ignore the green-and-silver banners showing the Slytherin serpent that were hanging up to celebrate Slytherin’s winning the house cup for the seventh year in a row. Trying not to react too much to the sudden hush and subsequent

whispered conversations that began as he entered the room, Harry slipped into a seat between Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the people who were now standing up to look at him, grateful when Dumbledore rose to speak.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were ... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts ...

"Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two points; in third, Ravenclaw, with four hundred and twenty-six; Gryffindor has four hundred and sixty-two points, and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

"Yes, yes, well done, Slytherin, well done," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still. The Slytherins' smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes ... to Mr. Ronald Weasley" (Harry noted with a slight smile that Ron suddenly looked like a sunburned radish), "to Miss Hermione Granger" (Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry couldn't tell if she was embarrassed or overcome) "and to Mr. Harry Potter, for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, for the use of cool logic in the face of fire, and for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award them each fifty points."

Anything else that might have been said was drowned out amid the chorus of cheers as three-quarters of the entire hall went wild, with even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff celebrating the downfall of Slytherin at long last. Glancing over, Harry saw Malfoy staring in shock at the three of them, prompting him to wave cheerily at his school 'adversary' (Although he freely acknowledged that Voldemort was the

more dangerous of the two, Malfoy was unquestionably the more... annoying, to say the least), prompting Malfoy's expression to shift to a look that suggested he would have a serious heart attack.

Of course, as Harry looked around at his housemates and the celebrating students, he knew that it was only a minor victory in the overall scheme of things- the *real* triumph lay in Voldemort's defeat, not some inter-house championship- but, nevertheless, it was quite an achievement. As Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged broad grins and handshakes with the surrounding students, he couldn't help but feel a certain... satisfaction, he supposed... at how things had turned out.

If nothing else, at least if he was still going to be famous now, he could be famous for something he *remembered* doing, rather than for something he'd had no control over.

Once the chaos of the feast was over, Harry and his friends finally received their exams results for the year. All in all, the marks weren't as surprising as they might have been; Ron's scores were a bit lower than Harry and Hermione's, and Harry's marks were more on the practical side of the course than Hermione's ones- Hermione, naturally, excelled at anything involving essays- but otherwise it was pretty straightforward. Neville's Herbology grade made up for his poor Potions one, but apart from that everyone's scores were pretty much evenly spread throughout the curriculum.

After the last few details of packing had been sorted out- Trevor once again making a bid for freedom that had to be averted, and there was some slight frustration at the notes forbidding the use of magic when out of school- the students were all transported back to the Hogwarts Express, where Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred and George spent the whole trip back talking and laughing as they exchanged stories and jokes about the past year's events.

Finally, they pulled into King's Cross, the three first years sitting around and talking as the guard filed the students out of the platform in small groups to prevent them attracting too much attention.

"You've *got* to come and stay over the holiday," Ron said as they waited. "I'll send an owl as soon as I can."

"Cool," Hermione smiled, nodding at her friend in agreement. "Just don't expect us to spend *all* our time there; if nothing else, the family'll be coming around for Harry's birthday, and we wouldn't want to miss seeing them- particularly with Natalie apparently possessing magical abilities *herself*..."

"Yeah..." Harry said, nodding in confirmation before he glanced up and saw the guard waving them over. "Well, let's get going; I, for one, would like to see Dad again."

"Yeah, you weren't exactly very talkative the *last* time he saw you..." Hermione said, chuckling slightly before her face fell as a thought occurred to her. "We're going to be in so much trouble for what we did, aren't we?"

Harry shrugged.

"Well, look at it this way," he said, as he smiled over at his sister. "We may be grounded for ages because we nearly got ourselves killed, but at least we're all still alive to *get* grounded."

And we've got a family who cares enough to actually worry about us, he added mentally.

He didn't *voice* it, of course- he hated to remind Hermione of his life with the Dursleys, even if it was only a brief comment- but he knew that it was true.

After all, what were the chances that he'd even have *told* the Dursleys about this whole mess if he'd still been staying with them? They'd just have been disappointed that he *hadn't* died...

As it was, as Harry walked back into the muggle world, he had relatives who cared what he did and whether he lived or died, and he was grateful for it.